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PC GAMER

NOVEMBER 2010

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PC GAMER®

#206 NOVEMBER 2010

EDITORIAL
Editor-In-Chief Logan Decker
Senior Editor Evan Lahti
Reviews Editor Dan Stapleton
Associate Editor Josh Augustine
Copy Editor Chris Comiskey
Interns Erik Belsaas, Robert Hathorne
Contributors Joe Bostic, Martin Davies, Desslock, Tim Edwards, Troy Goodfellow, Justin Mahboubian-Jones, Andy Mahood, Rich McCormick, Craig Pearson, David Perry, Tom Senior, Tim Stone
Producer Debra Guilfoyle
Edit Squirrel Tabasco

ART
Lead Designer Dan Fitzpatrick
Contributing Designer Christin Chi
Photographers Mark Madeo, Samantha Berg

BUSINESS
Publisher Kristen Salvatore
ksalvatore@futureus.com
Vice President, Games Kelley Corten
kcorten@futureus.com
Vice President, Sales and Marketing Rachelle Considine
rconsidine@futureus.com
Executive Director Integrated Sales Nathan Hunt
415-269-5408, nhunt@futureus.com
National Sales Manager Isaac Ugay
714-381-3419, iugay@futureus.com
Regional Sales Director Carol Gillard
646-723-5476, cgillard@futureus.com
Regonal Sales Manager Arthur St. Germain
650-238-2571, astgermain@futureus.com
Detroit Consumer Manager Alan Dickinson
248-792-2408, alandmedia@comcast.net
Senior Marketing Manager Andrea Recio-Ang
650-238-2548, arecio-ang@futureus.com
Marketing Coordinator Allyson Kardel
akardel@futureus.com
Advertising Coordinator Jose Urrutia
jurrutia@futureus.com

PRODUCTION
Production Director Michael Hollister
Senior Production Coordinator Dan Mallory
Print Order Coordinator Linh Chau-Ward

CONSUMER MARKETING
Vice President, Consumer Marketing Rich McCarthy
Circulation Director Stephanie Blake
Newsstand Director Bill Shewey
Consumer Marketing Operations Director Lisa Radler
Renewal And Billing Manager Mike Hill
Online Marketing Director Adam Whinston
Customer Service Manager Mike Frassica

FUTURE US, INC.
4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400
South San Francisco, CA 94080
www.futureus.com
Tel 650-872-1642
Fax 650-872-2207

President John Marcom
Vice President/CFO John Sutton
Human Resources Director Nancy Durlester DuBois

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Future Plc
30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon,
Ba1 2bw, England
www.futureplc.com
Tel +44 (0) 1225 442244 (Bath)
Tel +44 (0) 7042 4000 (London)

Chief Executive Stevie Spring
Non-executive Chairman Roger Parry
Group Finance Director John Bowman

Good Timing

Like most of the truants of my generation, the only thing I know about Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is its famous first line: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." (Depending, I assume, on how much money you had.) But that unforgettable introduction does evoke the climate of PC gaming news these days.

On the one hand, everybody knows that multiplatform publishers and console stakeholders are increasingly willing to sacrifice PC sales in favor of platform exclusives. Some of our favorite games are tamed by developers in order to deliver console-friendly sequels, and even more worrisome is the migration of some independent developers toward consoles as a result of absolutely insane levels PC game piracy.

On the other hand, the PC-exclusive *StarCraft II* (page 46) is on track to sell 6.5 million copies in the first six months of its launch. *Civilization V* (page 52) continues to thrive after 19 years of iterations. In July, retail console game sales dropped while retail PC sales increased[1]. And last year, gaming PCs outsold[2] two-to-one all console systems combined (not including those cute little handhelds).

But both these narratives strike me as being more relevant to accountants than to gamers. Neither one touches on the true measure of a platform's vitality, which is the level of its engagement with gamers. Activision understood this when it finally green-lighted *The Silver Lining*—the polished fan-created addition to the *King's Quest* series. Riot Games understands this as it turns a community mod into a full-blown genre with *League of Legends* (page 20). Indie developers are developing games including *Sleep is Death, Monaco and SpyParty* with entirely new multiplayer gaming experiences (that could never have been conceived on consoles, which were designed for games that were made over a decade ago). And who buys a game anymore without anticipating its mods and extensions?

Consoles require billions of dollars in life support every year to stay relevant, while PC gaming thrives today—from the blockbuster level to the indie grassroots—without spending a penny. I can't help but look at this issue cover-to-cover, as I did last night on the eve before it sailed to the printer, and think that this is definitely the best of times.

[1] *NPD, August 2010.* [2] *Horizons Research Report, PC Gaming Alliance, August 2, 2010.*

LOGAN DECKER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
logan@pcgamer.com

WHODUNIT

Evan Lahti
Senior Editor
Dragon Age 2 is bringing dramatic changes to our favorite fantasy RPG. How does Evan feel about it? Flip to page 46.

Dan Stapleton
Reviews Editor
Dan didn't rest until he'd conquered the world in every possible way for his review of *Civilization V* on page 52.

Tim Edwards
Editor (*PC Gamer* UK)
One of the world's foremost experts on Terran counterattack tactics, Tim tackles *StarCraft II* on page 60.

Josh Augustine
Associate Editor
Josh explores why *League of Legends* is so damn popular and how the developers are making it even better on page 18.

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BACK CHATTER

- Any chance The Spy could get some *Elder Scrolls* info for the readers? E3 was a huge disappointment on that front. **Allison Phillips**
- First *Dungeons & Dragons Online* went free-to-play, then *Lord of the Rings Online*, now *EverQuest II*. I wonder if *TOR* will follow suit? *EVE* would be nice, too. :) **Daniel Rice**
- Why are MMOs telling people they're "free-to-play?" That is such a load of bull. They're not free—you still have to pay to get something in the game, like a better character or a new outfit or whatever. If it was *free* you wouldn't have to pay a single dime for anything. **Steve Alen**

They said they're free-to-play, not free-to-dress-up-in-a-silly-hat. **PCG**

- People love to be jackasses online. *Garry's Mod* facilitates such jackassery. This is why *GM* succeeds. Having said that, I've come across some brilliant creations while playing *GM*. **J.D. Whited**
- If you snuck in a Decemberists reference into your GeForce GTX 480 review, as I suspect you may have, high-fives all around. **Marissa Wilk**

Fun first

One of the things that keep me reading *PC Gamer* instead of other publications is your honest, often harsh reviews. You're not swayed by marketing hype, and I applaud your willingness to call out a game that impedes the user experience with, say, restrictive DRM. It is my hope you that you will apply this same critical rigor in your review of *StarCraft II*, the sequel to one of my all-time favorite games. While the game promises to be fantastic, I feel that the lack of LAN support and Battle.net regional restrictions are a slap in the face of the consumer. I hope your final review score will reflect this. **Tarun Perkins**

We don't pull any punches in our reviews—if a game treats us poorly or lacks expected features like LAN, we'll make sure you know about it. But our scores are decided by how much fun a game is, not its copy protection, and unless it really impacts our gaming experience it won't affect the score. Our games over Battle.net have been flawless, so we can't ding the game for lack of LAN play. And while it's a bummer that we can't take on our PCG UK *counterparts, does that make the game less fun? Not really. Turn to page 60 to read our definitive review.* **PCG**

APBummer

Like *Hellgate London* before it, *APB* had such great potential, but at release it was a huge disappointment. (Both games were published by EA. Coincidence?) Thankfully, unlike Flagship Studios, Realtime Worlds has the time and budget to improve their game. But *APB* has already been reviewed! Will you guys do a "one month later" or "one year later" review to tell us when games get better? **Norbert Phan**

We don't do re-reviews (that'd get really confusing really quick), but we do follow up on MMOs that impress us with their post-release updates. EVE Online *is our poster child for a game that began as an ugly duckling, but grew up to become a beautiful swan. In a spaceship. With lasers. This month, check out our Massive Attack section on page 24 for updates on what's new and improved in* Aion *and* EverQuest II. **PCG**

We'll check back with *APB* later to see if they've patched some pants onto this guy.

Mind = blown

In the September issue's Dev Man Talking column, Andy Schatz described the "First Great Game." I thought about the article for a couple days until it dawned on me that the First Great Game already exists: we live it every day. Life is short and weird, filled with love, friendship, nature and betrayal. Life doesn't ask us to pretend to be someone else. Life is filled with "Aha!" moments. And when life runs out of "Aha!" moments, it ends. **Riley Cox**

Deathwing has no lips

Like the old saying goes, "You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig." *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* will be no exception. *WoW* lost touch with class balance since the first patch, and Blizzard has never been able to regain it. This coupled with "insanely powerful loot," as you put it in the September issue cover story, is everything that drives many of us away from the game for good. It's just not that much fun anymore. **I.B. Chance**

I'd challenge you to find any MMO that has perfect class balance—it's simply not possible in a game with any complexity. Blizzard has done as good a job as any developer at keeping

We dunno. He looks pretty hot in lipstick.

at least one talent tree for each class viable in PvP to ensure everyone has a route to compete and have fun. It's not ideal, but ideals don't exist for class balancing in MMOs. Also, upgrading loot is a key component to any new content release, and Blizzard is going above and beyond the call of duty by increasing health pools and reducing healing to ensure that the more powerful loot doesn't break the combat system, as it usually does later in the lives of most MMOs. Are you sure you don't just dislike MMOs in general? **Josh**

Strategy: the final frontier

Are there any good *Star Trek* strategy games? I don't care if it is real-time or turn-based. **Colin Capp**

Nothing that's scored over 69%, regrettably. All is not lost, however. One of the best Star Trek *strategy games we've played is the* Sacrifice of Angels 2 *mod for* Sins of a Solar Empire. *Check it out here: bit.ly/STSOA2* **PCG**

Leave it to fanatical Trekker modders to out-do the professionals.

THE HOT MAIL

Beta or demo?

After reading your review of *APB* in September's issue, I was surprised to see how little it had changed since the closed beta. Bad matchmaking, bad balancing, bad mission setups—the community told Realtime Worlds about all of this during beta. I'm sad, yet not surprised, to see that none of them were fixed. Are these public betas we've been playing just for show? Are they the new demos? **DSI**

In a way. These open betas have dual roles: to serve as demos to energize the community ahead of release, and to test the game on a wider variety of hardware than a quality-assurance team could. It's mostly to work out technical problems, though—by the time a game hits open beta, it's often feature-locked (meaning not much new will be added or radically changed before release), so developers usually can't make the sweeping changes the community asks for, even if they want to. If you try an open beta and you don't like what you see, wait for the review—chances are the final game won't be a whole lot better. **PCG**

A great letter deserves a great prize; that's why we're sending DSI a copy of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat* in appreciation of his stellar correspondence. Look up top to see how you can get in touch with *PC Gamer* and earn your chance to win next month's PRIZE OF MYSTERY!

PRTSCN

It's comforting to know that even the most battle-hardened mortal enemies can spare a minute to enjoy a quick snack together. **Jason Baxter**

It makes you think...if this Sandvich-based cease-fire works for Red and Blu, could it work in the Middle East? Do they make Sandviches in falafel? **PCG**

SHOW US YOURS Tell us your story with a great screenshot. Include PRTSCN in the subject line and you could win a sweet prize like this month's copy of *Battlefield: Bad Company 2 Limited Edition*!

Defender of Newerth

I have a huge bone to pick with your review of *Heroes of Newerth*. You guys gave it a 71%. Yes, the learning curve in *HoN* is tough, and some of the people playing it are e-gangsters, but a game that keeps me coming back for more is rated over 90% in my book. **Jerry Suner**

Our problem with HoN *wasn't as much with the game itself as that it is a multiplayer-only game with a hostile community that makes it extremely difficult for a newcomer to enjoy. When we buy a game and start playing we expect to be entertained, not berated and booted for failing to instantly understand how to play by very complicated rules.* HoN *will pay off in the long run if you dedicate yourself to learning and playing often, but for the average gamer it's just not a slam-dunk.* **PCG**

Good as new

I am a fan of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* games. I loved *Shadow of Chernobyl* and really liked *Call of Pripyat*. *Clear Sky* was a disappointment at first, but thanks to a huge fan base and modding community *Clear Sky* is now my favorite of the three. The community, through gameplay and graphics tweeks, have totally transformed this three-year-old game into something new and exciting to me! Let's see a console game do *that*. **Fmos9**

Modders have been busy adding drivable vehicles and uglier monsters to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Clear Sky*.

BACK CHATTER

- Goodbye social life. Goodbye Dean's List. Hello *Star Wars: The Old Republic!* **Stephen Turley**
- Space combat in *TOR*? I have to go change my shorts... **Ned Gnichtel**
- *TOR* has space combat! Awesome! Makes me miss the ol' days. Time to break out DOSBox and *TIE Fighter*! **Ryan Lamb**
- Anyone who automatically assumes *TOR* will suck needs go drink a tall glass of STFU. Reserve judgment until you actually try the game, you heathens! **Travis Lodge**
- *Alien Swarm* is hard, but that's probably a good thing. A team effort is required to get to the end. I like that. Thumbs up! **Donald Easton III**
- The fact that @pcgamer covers indie PC games is amazing and incredibly heartening. **@benjedwards**

WHERE WE PLAY

Play on the official *PC Gamer* community servers

Team Fortress 2
66.151.138.34:27015

ArmA 2
75.102.38.3:2332

Counter-Strike Source
207.210.252.63

Ventrilo (voice chat)
208.100.40.19:3796

Our game servers are provided by Art of War Central, *PCG*'s staff-approved hosting service. Visit **artofwarcentral.com**

Irrational Games Turns BioShock...

...Upside Down

Now we know why the developer skipped *BioShock 2*: so that it could take BIOSHOCK INFINITE to the skies *by Logan Decker*

The very first glimpse inside the world bathed in bright, golden sunlight created for *BioShock Infinite* sends an audible ripple of surprise throughout the audience at the behind-closed-doors announcement event staged in New York City. Our demo begins on a narrow cobblestone road with a crystalline stream of water trickling down its shoulder and then, a few paces later, suddenly emerges into a breathtaking vista. We're standing on a floating island; no, not just a floating island—we see that we're standing in the midst of an enormous archipelago of buildings connected by bridges and catwalks, soaring high above a patchwork of tilled fields on the Earth below. The view is vertiginous, threatening, yet somehow peaceful at the same time—like watching the first clouds gather before a storm.

At the time of the announcement, few would have guessed that Irrational Games had placed *BioShock 2* in the care of 2K Marin so that it could labor away in secret on that game's successor. In retrospect, however, it makes perfect sense, allowing Irrational's sequel to continue to explore the logical consequences of political extremes (as the first two games did) while overhauling the environment and gameplay such that *BioShock Infinite*, far from being *BioShock 3*, is instead a completely different game.

Infinite takes place in the aerial city of Columbia, created at the turn of the century as an emblem of American achievement and political righteousness. But instead, the flying fortress becomes a symbol of American folly when its hidden cache of weapons is deployed in a mission that Levine darkly compares to the ill-fated Philippine–American War that cost the lives of as many as 600,000 Filipinos.

Years after Columbia's exposure as a hovering "Death Star" (Levine's words), former Pinkerton agent Booker DeWitt is charged with rescuing the mysterious Elizabeth—think Diablo Cody with plasmid-like powers—from the now foundering, doomed city. It's at this point that we enter the game, plunged into footage reeling off moments of bracing chaos and raucous surprises—including a man's hapless expression as his shotgun is telekinetically removed from his hands, turned around 180 degrees, and discharged into his face.

The most significant distinction from the previous games is, naturally, the *BioShock Infinite*'s dizzying verticality. Where Rapture menaced you with its tight chambers and buckling corridors, Columbia taunts you with threats from above and below, and the ever-present danger of pulling a Wile E. Coyote off the edge of the city if you're not careful. Combat even takes place while you're suspended from Sky-Lines—rollercoaster-like rails that link the city to form the most completely insane public transportation system in history.

Extravagant, unabashedly political, and downright weird: Yes, it's like *BioShock*—and nothing like *BioShock* at the same time. It's also nothing like finished. But those dismayed by the 2012 release date can at least take comfort in knowing that Ken Levine and his team put up a damn good argument for skipping *BioShock 2* in favor of rethinking the entire game from the ground up. Or, rather, the sky down. ■

READ ME
PUBLISHER
2K Games
DEVELOPER
Irrational Games
LINK
bioshockinfinite.com
TWITTER
@irrationalgames

www.pcgamer.com

There may be no easier way to play *King's Bounty: Armored Princess* than via Beamdog.

Trent Oster: "We remove the complexity and hassle of PC games."

Easy does it

Newcomer simplifies your digital game buying

There's a new player in town after your online gaming dollars. Like Steam, Impulse and others, Beamdog.com is an online store where you can buy games, ranging from classics like Fallout *to more recent fare like* Disciples III: Renaissance. *Beamdog's Creative Director (and BioWare alumnus) Trent Oster fills us in on the details.*

What's the idea behind Beamdog?
I was always frustrated at the PC experience. I hated the trips out to the store, the 20 minutes waiting for data to copy off a CD/DVD, the browsing for install paths, etc. At Beamdog, our motto is "Great games, easy." We've managed to remove the entire install process. The second the download finishes, the game is ready to play.

What kinds of games are available?
We currently have over 200 games in the service (some of which we still have to launch) and we add around five games a day when things are moving well. We do have a focus on triple-A games, but we're currently working with a small group of leading indie developers who are serving as an "advisory council" for our efforts in the indie space. We have big plans.

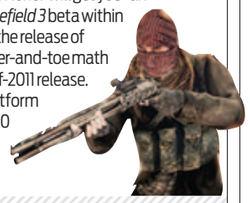
What kind of DRM can we expect?
When you buy a game from us, you get a license to run that game wherever you want. You can go to a new computer, download the player and download all your games. We have an automatic offline mode that kicks in when you lose your internet connection. In the event our server has to go offline, we simply set up the entire system to allow for offline play for the entire shutdown period.

What about mod support?
Sadly, we don't have any near-term plans for easy mod support. We have great respect for the mod community (as I personally spent five years leading the development of the very mod-friendly *Neverwinter Nights*), though, and given the rising quality bar in modding I'm sure they will be a future development area for us. In fact, we plan to never stop development, as we see the potential our platform has and all the great things we can offer our users. ■ *Chris Comiskey*

BATTLEFIELD 3 ANNOUNCED

STEALTHY SIGHT UNSEEN, EA LETS YOU BUY YOUR WAY INTO THE BETA

No one's seen *Battlefield 3* yet, but DICE confirmed its existence by promising that pre-ordering *Medal of Honor* will get you "an invitation to the *Battlefield 3* beta within 12 months following the release of *Medal of Honor*." Finger-and-toe math puts *BF3* as an end-of-2011 release. *BF3* will be a multiplatform game for PC, Xbox 360 and PS3 using DICE's Frostbite engine. **CP**



CREATIONISM

BUILD IT NEW FAMILY-ORIENTED BUILDING GAME FROM EA

EA Bright Light's *Create* is a fascinating twist on multiplayer. As more people explore the 2D platform puzzler world, the game unlocks more content. Players can design levels, and there are no "correct" solutions to the challenges. Everything from levels to solutions will be shared through www.create.ea.com when the game goes live toward the tail-end of 2011. **CP**

NOW PLAYING

AT THE PC GAMER WEB STORE

Feeling under the weather? Need a pick-me-up? Grabbing a new downloadable game from **www.pcgamer.com/store** is known to cure many maladies, from common boredom and idle hand syndrome to more exotic ailments like restless mouse-finger disease, MMO withdrawal, mild sunlight exposure, chronic sufficient sleep and epic lycanthropy.

Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4
Need for Speed World
Transformers: War for Cybertron
Mafia II

"Downloadendium!"

Start practicing: *StarCraft II* is your ticket to fame and fortune.

Big star-bucks

StarCraft II pro leagues kick off with a bang

That didn't take long: *StarCraft II*'s career as a competitive sporting event has begun, and it's already making history. Blizzard's partner in Korean Television, GomTV, has launched a world-wide league called the Global *StarCraft II* League (GSL), with a record-breaking $500,000 in prizes up for grabs. GomTV has begun monthly 64-player tournaments, culminating in a main tournament and the "Blizzard Cup" championships. The tournaments are viewable live via www.GomTV.net.

The stakes are high: whoever conquers the Blizzard Cup will take home 100 million Korean won (approximately $85,500); second place wins a very-respectable 30 million won ($25,300); and semifinalists receive 10 million won ($8,450)—more than the first-place winner of Major League Gaming's US-based competition this November.

In a press release by GomTV, representative Oh Joo Yang praised the openness of the GSL. "Anyone can participate at a professional level in this league. Nationality and team involvement is not necessary, as long as players have the skills to do well in the monthly leagues and move up to the upper league."

GomTV also plans on sponsoring skilled players and adding other *StarCraft II* tournaments, including a clan-based league. The details for GSL 2011 will be released near the end of this year. For broadcasting schedules (or information on how to join), visit www.gomtv.net. ■ *Erik Belsaas*

XFIRE SOLD

MONEY NEW OWNER IS A COMPETITIVE GAMING COMPANY

MTV's PC gaming IM client and social network, Xfire (www.xfire.com), has been sold for the second time. The new owner is competitive gaming company Titan Gaming, which runs gaming events and makes money through in-game betting and advertising. Titan claims that the service will continue uninterrupted for the 17 million-strong userbase, although most of the development staff has now left the company post-sale. While overshadowed by Steam in recent years, Xfire does freely offer its users a lot of innovative features: game stat-tracking, friends lists, video recording and profile pages. Let's hope that this high level of service continues under its new owners. **CP**

DELAYWATCH

RELEASE DATE *CRYSIS 2* AND *FABLE III* WON'T BE HOME FOR X-MAS

We'd hoped to slip back into Nomad's flattering, muscular Nanosuit in *Crysis 2* by the year's end, but word comes from EA that the gorgeous shooter sequel, set in the ruins of an alien-infested New York City, won't arrive until early 2011. Same deal with Atari's *Test Drive Unlimited 2*, which had been slated for 2010. Also, Microsoft announced that the PC version of *Fable III* would not ship until next year, several months after the console version is due, despite early promises of a simultaneous multiplatform release. Nobody was particularly suprised. **DS**

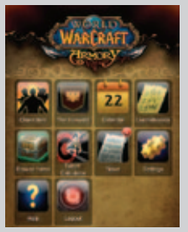
TRENDS

MMO MOBILE APPS

MMOs are reaching out into the real world via smartphones and media players. With these portable apps at your side, you can keep an eye on all of your characters' stats in real-time, even when you're away from your PC. We dug up three of the best and checked them out while on the toilet.

WoW Armory

1 This free *WoW* app for Apple iOS and Google Android phones displays all your characters' gear, stats, talents and glyphs, plus gives you mobile access to the auction house. For the raiders out there, you can leaf through your guildmates' profiles. www.wowarmory.com



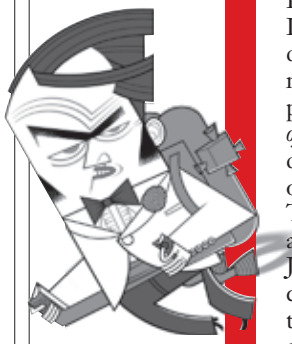
EVE Online Capsuleer

2 Though it's not made by CCP, the *EVE Online* community swears by Capsuleer 2.0. It's built to resemble the in-game interface, so navigating the program is simple from the start. It'll show you exactly how much time remains on the skill you're currently training, plus all your pilot's details are readily available to view. It's iOS-only, but it won't cost you a nickel. www.capsuleer.evesuite.com

Fallen Earth Companion

3 It's not free, but you get what you pay for—it's a damn sexy-looking app. It gives you access to your in-game mailbox, you can see which friends or clan members are online (and even chat with them), and you can view the enormous world map at will. The iOS and Android versions each cost two dollars, and there's a Blackberry alternative coming at an undisclosed date. www.fallenearth.com

THE SPY



The Spy's frequent-flyer miles are about to run out.

The Spy is shouting this report into the black box of a plummeting airplane. He hopes it'll provide a fitting epitaph to the many works of espionage, counter-intelligence and Rubik's cube-solving that were The Spy's forte. Whoever transcribes this, please ensure that The Spy comes across as calm and reserved in the face of death. Do not tell anyone The Spy was crying.

It all began at Eidos. The Spy received a message by carrier pigeon, a cipher that he decrypted using the El-Gamal method to read: "Lr Crft. Nw Gm. Srs Rbt. Lv N Ksss. Mthr." Good old mother, discovering a series reboot of Tomb Raider, nothing to do with the isometric action platform game *Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light*. The Spy hopped on a plane to developer Crystal Dynamics, parachuted out and landed snugly in its chimney. Through the walls he heard tell of a radical approach to the ninth Lara game. Set on a Japanese island, the idea is to have one, cohesive level with multiple ways around the puzzles. We'll also be exploring Lara's origins, so she'll be younger and inexperienced in the ways of raiding tombs.

I hope you can still hear The Spy. Do black boxes even work like this? Hello? [sound of banging] Right, well, anyway, The Spy was left sooty and bruised, but another communiqué arrived.

It was one word: "Seattle." The Spy took to the skies again. This couldn't be Valve or Runic. Monolith? Monolith doesn't have a chimney, so The Spy dropped onto its front lawn, broke through the front door and politely asked what jobs were available. Monolith shared that it's looking for people with design skills applicable to an "open world or sandbox" game. The Spy hopes Mono is working on something real-world, with slow motion and Japanese schoolgirls. Wait, don't transcribe that bit.

A familiar ring

Now that The Spy thinks of it, he did hear on the grapevine (Gaming Recon And Personal Espionage Volume Increasing News Embiggener) that Monolith's owner, Warner Brothers, intends to make a Hobbit game to support Peter Jackson's return to Tolkien. If the two aren't connected, then may God strike The Spy dead in a plane crash.

The wing just came off! Curse you, Almighty Father! Clearly The Spy doesn't have lot of time left.

> **Monolith's owner, Warner Brothers, intends to make a Hobbit game.**

After infiltrating Monolith, The Spy was about to drop his resume into the building (in this economic climate, you can't be too careful), when another job popped up on The Spy's patented sunglasses heads-up display. Also, if this plane does smash into the side of Everest, as Peter Molyneux promised it would before he leapt out, taking the only parachute, please make sure Baby Spy gets the glasses. That little tyke.

No flowers, by request

The message told The Spy to head for EA's HQ in San Francisco: it's planning something big. The Spy should've realized something was wrong when he was whisked to a private jet at the airport. In the air, there was a loud bang as the pilot's door swung open to reveal Peter Molyneux, laughing maniacally. "I can't let you tell the world about the new *Syndicate*!" he screamed. "EA's trademark applications are just the start. Those bastard developers at Starbreeze don't know who they're dealing with."

Then Pete opened the door and jumped out. *Syndicate*, eh? Molyneux's long-ago amoral, squad-based tactical action game. The Spy quickly investigated: EA has registered new trademarks for the game. The studio, Starbreeze, has cancelled a Jason Bourne game to focus on this. There's going to be a big announcement from EA on it. But not yet.

Look, The Spy is sure he's about to die here, so with his final breath let him tell you that it was Batman and—[sound of impact]—the 1988 Denver Broncos—[explosion]—Spy—[prolonged sounds of explosion] out. ■ *The Spy*

Massive Attack

The MMO Gotham Needs

Fast action, story-driven missions raise hopes for **DC UNIVERSE ONLINE** *by Josh Augustine*

Mark Hammill lends his iconic voice to the Joker in *DCUO*.

Great—now he's a giant, evil scarecrow *with guns*.

Oh crap, it's Scarecrow. I'm no comic book buff, but I've seen enough Christian Bale *Batman* movies to know that this king of psyche won't go down easy. I've already fought my way through his minions and hysteria-inducing toxins during the twenty quests that led me here. Now I've got him trapped in the sewers and need to finish the job. Batwoman's showed up to help, so I'm feeling pretty confident. That changed fast—the fight played perfectly into Scarecrow's shtick, with different phases embodying different phobias, including herpetophobia, the fear of reptiles (alligator-men come bursting out of walls) and the ever-obscure condition known as ballistophobia, the fear of bullets (Scarecrow gets massive tommy guns). Just when I think we've got this in the bag, Scarecrow materializes Batwoman's greatest fear—her friends turning against her—and I find myself hysterically defending her from ghastly hallucinations of Batman and the gang gone bad.

Fighting with purpose

Scarecrow's boss fight was the perfect capstone to the story I'd been unraveling. I'd been hunting him down, uncovering his devious plot over the 20 missions that led up to the fight. The well-crafted comic book cutscene that followed Scarecrow's defeat made it even more satisfying. Eighty percent of the quests in the game are tied to a boss storyline, and there are 60 of these boss plots to foil (that's 1,200 quests revolving around hunting iconic bosses). Along the way, your mentor—either Batman, Superman or Wonder Woman as a hero and Joker, Lex Luthor or Circe as a villain—or one of their sidekicks/allies offers help and advice.

Superhero squad

If you're not into fighting (or committing) crime solo, you can team up with seven other players to tackle Alerts (quick co-op scenarios with auto-group forming like *WoW*'s dungeon finder tool), the more challenging raids or PvP scenarios. These instances allow you to explore more areas of the DC universe, such as Smallville, Area 51 or a moon base, since the open world content is contained within the always-night Gotham City and always-day Metropolis. Although each is more than 900 square blocks large, so there's still room for plenty of diversity within the open world areas.

Group composition is liberatingly flexible—all characters are DPS-focused at their core, but players can change their character's "tactics" in between combat to sacrifice DPS temporarily in exchange for the ability to tank, heal or crowd control. For example, my brawler swapped into an ice mode that granted him tanking abilities just by clicking one button.

High standards

Generally low expectations have made it easy for MMOs to get away with sub-awesome graphics or slightly-clunky combat. That's why it was so heartening to hear *DCUO*'s developers insist that I judge *DCUO*'s graphics and combat against action-RPGs like *Arkham Asylum* than against other superhero MMOs. With the addition of physics-based gameplay (I froze a baddie inside a giant bubble and threw him at his friends) and strong combo-based brawling combat, *DCUO* looks and plays more like *Arkham Asylum* than existing MMOs—and that's a very good thing. ■

Fiery axes can substitute for super powers anytime.

Being Batman

Let's face it, we all wish we were the Dark Knight

Sony Online has sat on this atom bomb of awesomeness for awhile—you *can* play as all the big-name superheroes and villains in the DC Universe. In "iconic mode," players take control of a canonical character like the Joker and battle in a capture-point map. Powers and stats are pre-defined for each iconic and not affected by a player's abilities or gear. Joker, for example, can hide himself in a giant present to absorb damage or take to the skies with a jetpack and fire dual pistols, which can target individually.

The match I played was set in a platform-filled Batcave, with turrets and sentry drones scattered around for you to hack to turn to your team's side. These interactive elements are map-dependant: in Arkham Asylum, you'll be releasing inmates to help your team; in a laboratory map, you can drop other players into vats of chemicals that have random effects on them—both good and bad.

Meet Jim Lee Hardcore gamer, MMO nut and DC's top artist

Legendary comic book artist and Executive Creative Director for *DCUO*, Jim Lee, is a long-time gamer. He started with *Pong* and has migrated through *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *WoW*, and *Modern Warfare II* (among many others) over the years.

Jim Lee on mixing work with play:
"I used to draw, kill a spawn in *EverQuest*, chug an invisibility potion and run to the next room, get more loot and draw again until it respawned...I'd play for 12-15 hours at a time."

...on why he loves MMOs:
"I love the immersive quality of these games; that you're playing and strategizing with real people; the community that develops around them and the anecdotal strategies that crop up like, 'if you stand over here the main mob won't spawn'...The sense of adventure; you felt like a pioneer trying to break new lands."

...on playing hero or villain in DCUO:
"Oh I'll definitely be playing a villain—I spend all my creative time drawing comics from the hero's point of view, but *DC* has the best rogue's gallery...I want to make sure that they get the same exciting and deep experience as the heroes."

...on keeping the comics coming:
"I'd love to incorporate the best player-made heroes and villains into the bi-weekly comic book [digital and print] that we'll be doing for the game."

Carrying the Banner

Less than a year old, **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS** is already leading the pack of *DotA*-inspired games—and it's just getting started ***by Josh Augustine***

It's not surprising that a game like *League of Legends*—which massively improves the addictive arena gameplay of the *Warcraft III* custom map mod *Defense of the Ancients* (*DotA*)—was made; what's surprising is that it took so darn long for someone to do it right.

DotA was released in 2003, and within two years it was adopted into the professional competitive circuit—not bad for a single fan-made map that lets player-controlled hero units duke it out in a large battlefield arena filled with NPC creatures and turrets. In 2006, Steve Feak, the creator of the most popular version of the map (*DotA Allstars*) joined newly created Riot Games with the goal of liberating *DotA*'s unique gameplay from its prison: a game engine and UI designed for a completely different game. By building *LoL* from the ground up to facilitate *DotA*-style battlefield arena gameplay, Riot created a game that's finally realizing *DotA*'s full potential—and they're not charging you to play it!

LoL's lore allows for the weird, monstrous and fantastical to fight side-by-side in the arena.

The times they are a changin'

LoL isn't a simple copycat, as the flippant label "*DotA* clone" implies. The veteran *DotA* players at Riot Games dissected *DotA*'s gameplay with expert precision, extracting elements that hindered fun and adding new mechanics that change the game dramatically—such as shrubbery that breaks line of sight, providing ambush locations; passive abilities; and persistent character progression outside the individual matches.

Another big change is the addition of new maps. That might sound like a no-brainer, but *DotA* was always a single 5v5 map. *LoL*'s Twisted Treeline facilitates teams of three and is a favorite around the *PC Gamer* compound because it allows us to field a team even when half of us are busy on deadlines.

I admit that I was a little shocked at how willing Riot is to deviate from *DotA*'s proven formula, but CEO Marc Merrill explained it to me this way: "We're always looking for ways to innovate and push the envelope. This genre is in its infancy—there's a lot of room to extend this character-driven gameplay, where interesting characters level up through individual game sessions, to a large variety of different types of gameplay. We're intent on exploring that."

Community effort

By far the most radical difference between *LoL* and *DotA* is the community. *DotA* has the least-friendly gaming community I've ever seen—unless you're a competitive-level player, you're more likely to get cussed out for an hour straight than have any semblance of fun. Riot's put a huge effort into fostering a community "where the *de facto* mode is to be a nice person, helpful and a good sport," according to Merrill, who prides himself on Riot's leadership by example in this regard by hosting contests that reward veterans for helping new players, banning abusive players and publishing a code of conduct called the Summoner's Code it asks players to follow. Whatever Riot's doing, it's working—the friendliness of this community could be considered a minor miracle.

The game's friendly community is all the more impressive considering that *LoL* is free to play, a feature that usually attracts players who revel in trolling their fellow gamers. In fact, the free-to-play business model has done nothing but make *LoL* a better game, as far as I can tell, and Merrill says the model has given Riot strong motivation to excel. "Being free to play shifts the burden onto the developer to create an amazing experience and constantly keep the players happy and satisfied."

But the proof is in the pudding, and *LoL*'s pudding overfloweth: over 100 new skins, 20 new champions, three new maps, and 20 new items have been added since launch.

Playing for keeps

Competitive play finds a home in new ranked matches

In July, as part of the Season One update, Riot introduced Ranked Matches: a competitive-level mode complete with alternating hero selection, selective hero banning and improved statistical tracking. Those stats—such as average gold earned or highest critical strike—are displayed in the game's client via a page very reminiscent of *World of Warcraft*'s Armory website, and ladders allow players to constantly see where they stand amongst the competition. At press time, almost 2,000,000 matches have been played and over 60,000 players are ranked in the ladders.

LoL was recently accepted into the Majors of the Electronic Sports League, will be played in the grand finals of the World Cyber Games, and will host its first international tournament (with a $100,000 prize) to conclude the game's first "season." Things are only going to get more exciting on the competitive front when *LoL* is released in Asia within the next year.

New and Improved

Less than a year after launch, the game is getting a big facelift, with new shaders and high-quality textures that effectively restyle the characters and environments from cartoons to action figures—and we love it!

GRAGAS

MORDEKAISER

TERRAIN

The new map introduces some revolutionary new feat—*oooh* look at all the pretty flowers!

New groups of neutral NPCs mix up strategy in Magma Chamber.

Fights will be focused on smaller 1v1 and 2v2 conflicts.

Put your magma where your mouth is

If Merrill's right, and this genre's in its infancy, it's about to hit a growth spurt—the upcoming map that we got the exclusive sneak peek at adds even more brand-new mechanics to the game!

The new map, Magma Chamber, has a rich back story about being carved out of the belly of a dormant volcano and being "the League's premier arena," but what players will really care about is that it's an oversized 5v5 map with new neutral NPCs that grant brand-new types of buffs when killed, and new brush configurations to let skilled players pop in and out of view to cast spells and then make their escape. Designed to dissuade characters from switching lanes as often as they do on the current 5v5 map, Magma Chamber significantly increases the distance between lanes. As Associate Producer Jeff Jew told me, "You're going to want to have a lot of characters that are good in 1v1s or 2v2s because you're going to be fighting independently—making characters that are not viable in Summoner's Rift very viable in Magma Chamber." But no champion is an island, so teleporters located inside both teams' territory will allow teammates to rapidly mobilize to come to the aid of their allies.

The developers told me that there's currently no way to awaken the dormant volcano and trigger lava flows (I was bummed to hear that) but they like the idea of hazards such as lava and are hoping to add them to the map later on.

Only the beginning

The developers I spoke with are absolutely overflowing with optimism—listening to them get excited about the massive potential they see for new gameplay modes in the genre is contagious. *League of Legends* has already proven that great games can come without a price tag, and I expect that the ambitious team at Riot is going to prove a lot more in the coming months and years.

First reveal of new champion: Irelia

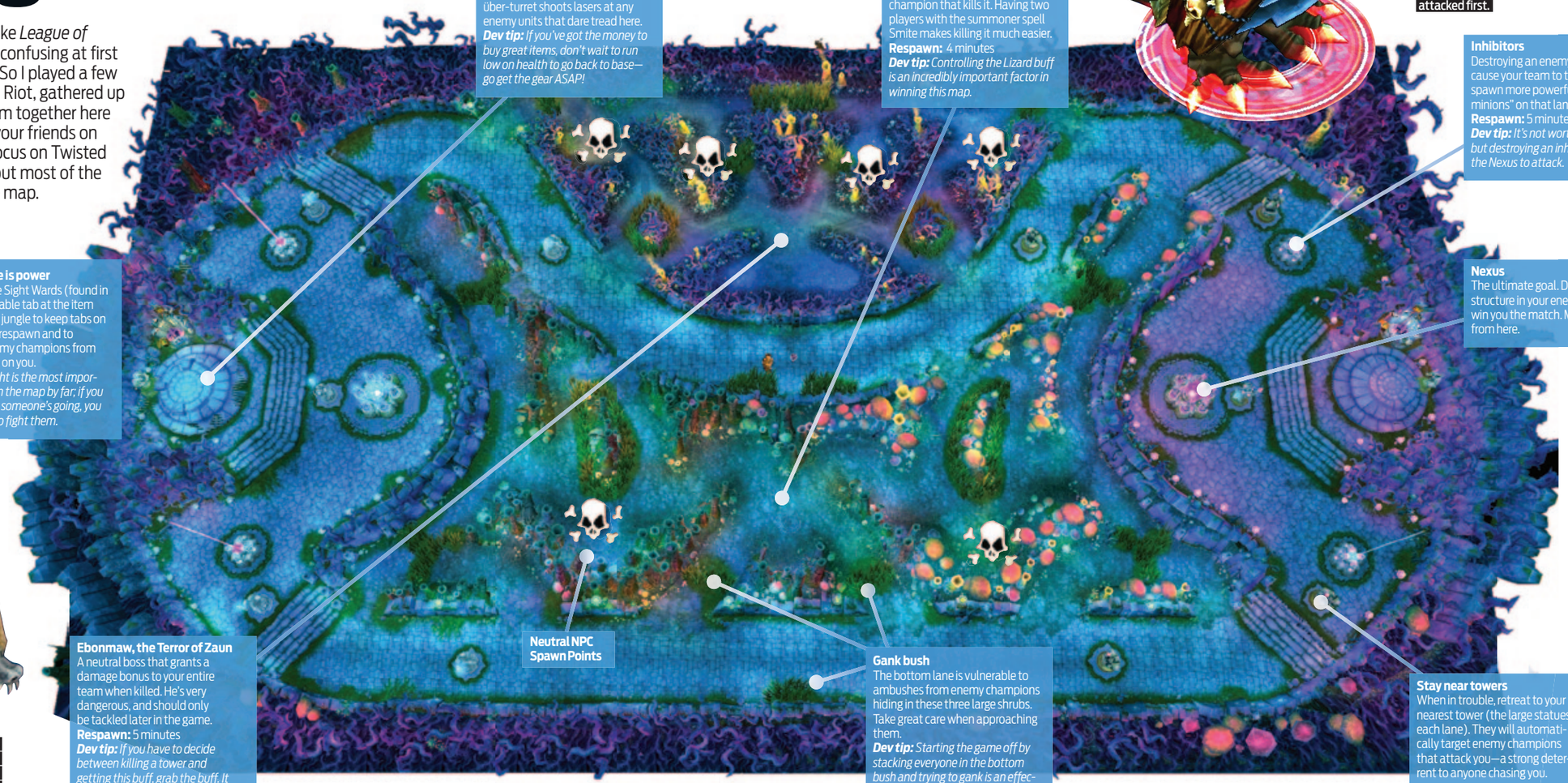
Irelia is captain of the guard in a city filled with ninjas, which should give you a good idea of just how badass she is. When she should have died in battle, she simply refused to stop fighting, forcing herself back up (with a little magical help) and threw herself at her enemies once more–only this time her oversized sword was somehow floating in the air, swirling around her of its own accord.

Designed to be a burst-melee DPS character that thrives when she's outnumbered, Irelia's biggest weakness is stuns and other crowd control. Her abilities—a dash whose cooldown is refreshed when you successfully kill a target with it, a passive boost to her attack speed when surrounded by opponents and an ultimate ability that summons one or more floating blades to fight alongside her—make her sound like a hybrid of Shaco and Katarina.

Getting Started

If you haven't played a game like *League of Legends* before, it can be very confusing at first to figure out what's going on. So I played a few games with the developers at Riot, gathered up all their tips and tricks, and put them together here as a starter's guide to get you and your friends on the road to victory in no time. We focus on Twisted Treeline, a 3v3 map, for simplicity, but most of the concepts can be carried over to any map.

Looks nasty; hits nasty. Take caution around this hulking dragon.



Item Shop / Safety
Standing on this platform will heal and restore mana to your champion, and let you to purchase items from the store. An indestructible über-turret shoots lasers at any enemy units that dare tread here.
Dev tip: *If you've got the money to buy great items, don't wait to run low on health to go back to base—go get the gear ASAP!*

Grez the Lizard Lord
A neutral NPC that grants damage-over-time and slowing effects to the basic attacks of the champion that kills it. Having two players with the summoner spell Smite makes killing it much easier.
Respawn: 4 minutes
Dev tip: *Controlling the Lizard buff is an incredibly important factor in winning this map.*

Grez won't attack unless he's attacked first.

Inhibitors
Destroying an enemy Inhibitor will cause your team to temporarily spawn more powerful "super minions" on that lane.
Respawn: 5 minutes
Dev tip: *It's not worth dying for, but destroying an inhibitor exposes the Nexus to attack.*

Nexus
The ultimate goal. Destroying this structure in your enemy's base will win you the match. Minions spawn from here.

Knowledge is power
Always have Sight Wards (found in the consumable tab at the item shop) in the jungle to keep tabs on when NPCs respawn and to prevent enemy champions from sneaking up on you.
Dev tip: *Sight is the most important thing on the map by far; if you know where someone's going, you don't have to fight them.*

Ebonmaw, the Terror of Zaun
A neutral boss that grants a damage bonus to your entire team when killed. He's very dangerous, and should only be tackled later in the game.
Respawn: 5 minutes
Dev tip: *If you have to decide between killing a tower and getting this buff, grab the buff. It will allow you to kill a tower later.*

Neutral NPC Spawn Points

Gank bush
The bottom lane is vulnerable to ambushes from enemy champions hiding in these three large shrubs. Take great care when approaching them.
Dev tip: *Starting the game off by stacking everyone in the bottom bush and trying to gank is an effective tactic, but very predictable.*

Stay near towers
When in trouble, retreat to your nearest tower (the large statues in each lane). They will automatically target enemy champions that attack you—a strong deterrent to anyone chasing you.

Five Steps to Victory

It's easier than it looks—if you know what to do

1. DON'T DIE

This isn't *Quake*—the most important rule might seem simple at first, but it's hard to learn. Staying alive is more important than getting kills. Enemy champions get heaps of gold and XP for killing you, letting them quickly outscale your team if you die a lot (known as "feeding" the other team).

Dev tip: *I'd rather my record be 2-0 than 6-5, but trading one death for two kills is still a victory.*

2. KILL MINIONS

Killing minions is key to leveling your champion, but unlike XP (which you'll get as long as you're within range) you only get gold from minions if you deal the killing blow. Every minion not killed by a champion is wasted gold, so try to time your attacks to nick the last bit of health off!

Dev tip: *The biggest differential between good and bad players is how many last hits they have.*

3. FIND THE RIGHT CHAMPION

LoL has a ton of champions, and in that sea of champions is one that's perfect for you. To find it, try playing the 10 free champions (which rotate each week) until you're struck by one you really enjoy and want to buy. Avoid pure support characters on this map—go for ones that can take care of themselves.

Dev tip: *Dr. Mundo, Jax, Warwick, Kayle and Shaco are all very solid picks for new players on this map.*

4. BUY WISELY

Recommended items for your champion are listed in the top-right of the item shop window; stick with these until you know the champion well enough to pick your own. It's a good idea to alter your purchases based on your opponents—if you're facing a lot of casters, grab magic resist items first.

Dev tip: *One character should buy an Elixir of Fortitude, a health potion and a Sight Ward to lead the charge at the start of the match.*

5. BE A TEAM PLAYER

Communicating to coordinate your team's attacks and defense is essential. Constantly keep an eye on where your allies and enemies are, and let your teammates know if the person you were fighting disappears—more than likely, they're running to ambush your allies.

Dev tip: *There are very few champions that can push and win on their own. You need to rely on teamwork.*

I think we can all agree that something this ugly deserves to be killed repeatedly.

Grind-B-Gone

Aion's latest patch reduces the pain, ups the fun

Aptly labeled "*Aion* 2.0," *Aion*'s latest patch—launching quick on the heels of the previous patch, which heavily reduced the game's tedious leveling by boosting XP gains and quest item drop rates—looks to redefine the game's grind-tastic image once and for all with its oversized buffet of fresh content. First in line are the eight new instances, including two lower-level, solo-play dungeons, and the additional low-level quests and new windstreams that move you around zones quickly make leveling new characters much more palatable.

But *Aion*'s community isn't going soft—they're as hardcore as ever, as evidenced by the treatment of pets in 2.0. Vanity pets that only prettify the place (like those in *WoW*) simply won't do, so NCsoft is making them into legitimate tools for your character that offer benefits such as extra bag slots and "eating" several lesser items to create a single higher-quality item (the phrase "pooping greens" seems inevitable).

Aion's famous, intense PvPvE is getting a nice update as well. Players battle aboard a Balaur supply ship as they invade their shared enemy's home world, Balaurea, en route to the new level cap of 55. During the voyage players will uncover new weapons, items and skills—everything you'd expect from a paid expansion, but it's all included in this free patch. ■ ***Josh Augustine***

DEAD MAN'S DIMENSION

CREEPY PLANE OF DEATH ANNOUNCED FOR *RIFT*

Trion cranked up the awesome meter on what was already the most interesting element of the upcoming *Rift: Planes of Telara* with the announcement that among the dimensions that invade your homeland through portals (aka "rifts") is the bad-as-it-sounds Plane of Death. Zombies, evil spirits and vampires will all march into your backyard, and they don't look like the fun-loving *Plants vs. Zombies* type. **JA**

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

TRENDS *EQ2* PUTS ONE FOOT IN THE F2P POOL

EverQuest II is joining the other AAA MMOs offering their goods to the unpaying masses, but in a new way: Sony Online is leaving the subscription servers completely untouched, while launching an entirely separate free-to-play version of the game on new servers with cash shop items and optional subscription models for purchase. SOE plans to operate the two independent versions of the game side-by-side indefinitely. **JA**

DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

GUILD WARS 2 THE MMO THAT BUCKS ALL TRENDS

Guild Wars 2 is shaping up to be just as eccentric as the original (having no subscription fees was a weird, foreign concept for MMOs in 2005). *GW2* sports dynamic events that let players change the world for everyone, short co-op mini-games, and now ArenaNet says that the 80 character levels will each take roughly the same amount of time to progress through—that's crazy talk! And we like it. **JA**

Stretched Thin

CCP's limited dev resources troubling **EVE** community

EVE Online players, as well as their representatives on the CSM—the game's player council that we investigated in our June 2010 feature—were recently stunned to hear that CCP won't be acting on any of the player council's suggestions for the next 18 months, going back on its earlier promise to give the CSM the same priority as every other group within the company.

With most of its developers working on the upcoming *EVE* expansion *Incarna* and the console tie-in *DUST 514*, CCP found itself

short on developer power. Instead of dropping the CSM entirely, CCP's Senior Producer Arnar Gylfason, wants to use the CSM to "actively help us prioritize our backlog of fixes, additions and such [that] we keep and revisit at the onset of development of an expansion."

Despite the troubles, the Chairman of the CSM, Carole Pivarnik, still believes that the CSM/CCP relationship is "on the right track" but insists that CCP needs to prove that they take the CSM seriously. ■ ***David Perry***

DEV MAN TALKING

Joe Bostic is co-founder and chief creative director of Petroglyph. Joe was lead programmer, co-creator, and combat designer for *Dune II*, *Command & Conquer* (including *Red Alert*), plus a bunch of expansions. His favorite cheese is pepper jack.

I love RTS games, and I have since I first worked on *Dune II* and saw *Command & Conquer* gain such a great following. But it seems that while technology has changed so much since those first Tiberium harvesters, the gameplay has mostly remained static. RTS players know what to expect: a race in the economic trenches to rush their most powerful units, and online play dominated by PvP and its hardcore fans, pushing casual and co-op gamers away. These types of gameplay have their devotees and are often fun, but the RTS genre has so much room to grow, so many avenues that need to be explored.

Anyone familiar with real-time strategy gameplay knows that the first thing you do when the loading screen vanishes is send your gatherers to cut wood or mine gold or harvest crystals. You use those resources to build your base and rush as many of your units at your opponent's base as you can before he beats you to the punch.

It's fun to collect resources and watch a base grow, but there's only so much innovation down that path. The real energy in RTS ultimately lies in the actual tactics players apply, but battles never come down to combat micromanagement unless both sides are equally matched in the economic game.

It's good to see some recent RTSes shift towards a greater emphasis on tactics than base-building. The *Total War* series led the pack, but *World in Conflict*, *RUSE*, *End War*, *Empire at War* all try to hinge victory on precise, savvy unit management in the heat of battle. This new style of RTS allows players to dive straight into combat and test their command skill, without worrying about how fast they can climb a tech tree.

Still, the RTS audience is shrinking when it should be growing. There isn't a perfect overlap with the board gaming audience, but that's a phenomenon that's exploded over the past year—partially because the "hoard-and-horde" strategy is just one of the ruts RTS gaming has fallen into, causing it to fall behind the pack since the advent of the internet, persistent worlds and cooperative gameplay.

One example: not all players crave the white-knuckle, aggressive competition of PvP, yet that's the only online play most RTS games offer. The vast majority of people who buy an RTS do so because they want to experience the PvE campaign, and they have different skill-sets and expectations than the PvP veterans. They want to strategize and execute a combat plan, withdraw if things get too rough to envision a new plan, and repeat until they're successful.

Together, success!

This sort of play works really well in a cooperative environment, where each player takes responsibility for some aspect of the battle, and the team succeeds together. So many RTS games have overlooked cooperative gameplay, especially co-op PvE. You should be able to join your friends for challenging missions, not just to get steamrolled together by hardcore PvPers.

With MMOs and persistent worlds so dominant in the minds of gamers, it's important to realize that cooperative play is the future of both PvE and PvP. It's compelling to be part of a group working toward common goals, and to navigate the social implications of the online world.

> **"The RTS genre has so many avenues that need to be explored."**

The next generation of RTS games should embrace cooperative play. They should balance gameplay around tactical combat: move, counter-move, charge, retreat, feint, kill zones, ambush—all the things that excite players about warfare. And persistent worlds mean players should be able to grow and customize their armies over time, investing time and energy for long-term results, while progressing at their chosen pace.

And whenever possible, take the RTS genre online. Because mark my words, this whole "internet thing" is going to catch on! ■

RTS graphics have greatly improved over the past decade, but the gameplay hasn't changed a whole lot.

IN SIMULATION

When not working on his A-10 Warthog switch flipping and flying skills **Andy Mahood** has also been playing *DCS: Black Shark*, *iRacing*; *Rise of Flight*, *Split/Second* and *Silent Hunter 5*.

After spending just a week with an early build of *DCS: A-10C Warthog*, I can confidently predict that combat flight sim fans everywhere are in for a major treat later this year. Although the version I have loaded is still in early beta, it sparkles with unparalleled authenticity and gameplay depth.

If you've spent any stick time with *DCS: Black Shark*—Eagle Dynamics' previous release—then you already have an idea what's in store. An elaborately detailed, clickable cockpit featuring every single switch, lever, button, dial, and display screen of consequence (from the actual A-10); intricate 3D aircraft modeling that rivals anything currently on the market; and some of the prettiest pyrotechnics you're ever likely to singe your eyebrows on.

As Russian as apple pie

Of course, the switch from *Black Shark*'s Russian rotary-wing gunship to a made-in-the-USA, anti-tank attack jet is sure to generate interest from American audiences. As good as *Black Shark* was, it still entails a big, mean non-NATO aircraft performing some decidedly unsympathetic actions against Western allies. Sorry Ivan, but it's time to say hello to my *leetle* Warthog friend!

As a more complex aircraft, the A-10C's virtual cockpit is considerably more detailed than the one modeled in *Black Shark's* Kamov Ka-50 gunship. Prominent MFDs (Multi-Function Displays) dominate your forward view with scores of clickable switches and buttons arrayed in their accurate real-world positions. If you're so inclined, you can even spend 10 minutes performing a hardcore cold ramp start-up procedure (for a preview, just do a search on *YouTube* for *DCS A-10C* and check out some of Matt Wagner's "Producer Notes" videos—you'll be amazed at what you see).

Switch-flipping 101

The finished product—which is due for online release by the end of the year and available through conventional retail channels by early 2011—is still quite early in its development cycle and, as such, didn't feature any working tutorials or arcade mode rookie cheats (the finished release *will* boast some incredibly intuitive interactive training missions, complete with voice-over narration and visual pointers to all the switches that need clicking). If I wanted to experience the simulation properly I was going to have to pore through the 800-plus-page PDF manual and figure out some of those switches and buttons for myself.

And I did. After finding the appropriate autopilot buttons, I gleefully set about flipping more switches while hungrily seeking out the A-10's weapons' arming controls. I soon discovered that those marvelously potent Maverick air-to-ground missiles require a full three-minute gyro alignment "warm-up" before they're ready for launch (and yes, the sim makes you wait it out).

> "Sorry Ivan, but it's time to say hello to my *leetle* Warthog."

Military grade

All of this hyper-realistic switch-flipping is part of what endears the DCS (Digital Combat Simulator) flight sim series to its rabidly loyal fan base (not to mention the über-authentic flight modeling and deep, layered campaign design). The Eagle Dynamics folks come by all this quite honestly too as they've been developing A-10 desktop simulator software for the U.S. Air National Guard for the past four years and part of their deal entailed the rights to create a commercial "entertainment" version that's 95% accurate to the real jet. Eagle had to change a few things for security reasons but you still won't find a more authentic representation of the Fairchild-Republic A-10C Thunderbolt outside of a U.S. military airbase.

I'm definitely looking forward to the release version with its in-depth tutorials, polished campaign structure and online compatibility with previous DCS titles, but I must admit I'm equally smitten with the pre-release beta that's dominated my free time for the past few days. In fact, now that I've done my reporting bit, I feel an urgent need to locate, lock up and blow the bejesus out of some hapless Russian ground target. ■

That's no cigar in this bird's mouth—it's a 30 mm GAU-8/A Avenger cannon loaded with depleted uranium armor-piercing shells.

ALTERNATE LIVES

Desslock is recovering from the World Series of Poker by campaigning in *StarCraft 2*, *Mass Effect*, *ArmA 2* and *Alpha Protocol*.

Do not misinterpret the tiny title for this column that's printed above—I am *not* searching for a candlelit rendezvous with a governess with a penchant for corporal punishment. I'm instead going to bleat about my frustration with massively multiplayer RPGs, or, to be more specific, with my inability to find compatible comrades in MMORPGs.

My disappointment with MMOs predates their very invention. Back when I played tabletop RPGs, assembling and retaining a reliable crew proved as difficult as the Labors of Hercules. Even when a gang was gathered, roleplaying momentum would be regularly derailed by imperative real-world gossip or some joker trying to pick up fictional barmaids. It was too much effort for too little reward, so I abandoned tabletop RPGs when computer RPGs appeared and allowed me to get my roleplaying fix without needing like-minded buddies.

The online RPGs that debuted in the '90s similarly disappointed me. Early MMOs generally required grouping with players, yet I rarely found players whose interests matched my own. I wasn't interested in investing 40 hours each week, and I wasn't fixated on grinding character levels. I wanted to meticulously explore the world, but most players seemed happiest loitering for interminable hours in respawn areas that offered the quickest leveling.

I did things many players considered absurd, like actually *reading* NPC dialogue and deducing task goals instead of utilizing online guides or interface mods to solve quests with the greatest possible efficiency. I made choices based upon what I believed my roleplaying alter-ego would most likely select instead of being handcuffed to the optimal damage-per-second path.

The Old Republic promises to have elaborate story arcs and companion relationships, just like single-player RPGs.

The leveling focus and the adopted, incongruent terminology (DOT, aggro, AOE, DPS, mules, nerfs, tweaking, etc.) all drive me nuts because they pull you out of the world. MMOs provide fantastic sandbox environments, but they foster attitudes and encourage behavior that reinforces their artificiality and isn't conducive to roleplaying. The dominant player mindset advocates skipping anything that minutely delays advancing to high-level raiding or PvP. Absurd marketplaces sprung up to cater to players willing to pay hundreds of dollars to skip most of the game. That attitude couldn't be more antithetical to mine.

But the genre is trending in positive directions, and the egregious flaws of early MMOs are unlikely to be repeated. *EVE Online* has stubbornly kept growing by offering a dynamic universe that encourages roleplaying. *World of Warcraft*'s success compels new MMOs to be solo-friendly and offer quest-driven environments.

Most of all, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* could become a breakthrough MMO thanks to its personable NPC companions that, if they work as advertised, will allow me to quest at my own pace instead of mandating that I scour the world for compatible peers. *Guild Wars* gave you NPC allies, but they were cannon fodder (and that feature is gone in *Guild Wars 2*). *TOR*'s NPC companions, by contrast, have their own story arcs and promise to be integrated into story-driven gameplay to a degree never before seen in an MMO. Hooking up with other players will still be encouraged, but having NPC companions available to stand in will further broaden the appeal of MMOs.

> "***WoW*'s success compels new MMOs to be solo-friendly.**"

Maybe I'm judging a whole community by a few bad apples—most players were at least amiable, if not compatible roleplayers. But social misfits are empowered by their anonymity, and many MMO fans so value their entitlement to anonymously berate peers that they even forced Blizzard to retreat from its "Real ID" proposal to require forum posters to use their real names. It seems that MMOs broke science by making sociopaths obsessively social. Of course, I'm clearly flinging stones from my glass crib, since naturally the only reason I utilize a pseudonym in *PC Gamer* is so that I can call Logan a hairless ape without fear of repercussion. ■

TACTICAL ADVANTAGE

Most of the things we call "maps" in games aren't maps at all. They are arenas that we play and fight and shoot in. A true map is about representation—using symbols and colors to translate ideas to the mind. The trees I cut down in *Age of Empires* do not really represent trees; as far as the game is concerned, they are trees.

However, the trees that are marked on a province or peninsula in *Europa Universalis* or *Birth of America* cues what your armies can expect in that territory. You don't directly interact with the trees or move through them. It's just a thematic acknowledgment that they are there.

Maps are one of those game features that can be used to communicate mood and setting in a way that you can't with game mechanics. Strategy game designers have a lot of leeway in how they choose to deliver that message.

Retro chic

Increasingly, mapmakers are going for that faux-historical look in their games. Add a sepia tone and some border art to *Ancient Trader*, and a simple trading game becomes a colorful world of monsters and ports. Fancy up the trees and cities, and the forthcoming *Hannibal: Rome and Carthage in the Second Punic War* looks like an ancient mosaic.

The most prominent example of this new love of old design is Paradox Interactive's *Victoria 2*. For the world map, they have moved beyond the bright colors of their earlier maps and gone for a more subdued and washed-out appearance. The names of nations and their overseas territories are scrawled across the map in a period font, evoking atlases from the turn of the century. The names will expand to denote new acquisitions as boundaries and empires expand, creating a map that immediately connects you to the time and place that Paradox wants you to be a part of.

As attractive and effective as this art design is, the most important task for any map is that it communicates the information that the user needs. The prettiest map in the world is useless if you end up taking a wrong turn on the way to Prussia. In *Ancient Trader*, for example, the sepia and goldenrod is so overwhelming that it is sometimes difficult to make out what the ink is saying regarding prices. *Victoria 2* relegates its period map to a view that most players will never use more than a couple of times in a game.

Image isn't everything

There is a tension between making a game map communicative and evocative. For real mapmakers, a map serves a specific purpose. Topographical maps don't do the same thing as political maps; resource maps are not road maps. Game maps have to convey a lot of information—sometimes very specific—all at once. Even with their single purpose, real world maps are rarely meant to be understood in an instant—but game maps must be easily understood in an instant.

The more you choose to evoke, the greater chance you lose information in the artistry. Art takes time, and the energy spent on making *Ancient Trader* look historical could have been spent in making the game's combat more interesting.

> "Game maps have to convey a lot of information at once."

As the song goes, art isn't easy. And good artistry overwhelms the senses; they are called "video" games for a reason. Make no mistake—I prefer these attempts to make a game look period-appropriate to ill-advised attempts at realism or poorly chosen blobs of color. But give me a map I can use first. Then make it pretty. ■

From *Victoria 2*—a beautiful map that you never have to look at in order to play the game.

Troy Goodfellow blogs about strategy games at Flash of Steel and hosts the podcast Three Moves Ahead. He loves maps, but has no sense of direction. Troy is playing *Hearts of Iron 3: Semper Fi* and *Red Dead Redemption*.

FACE OFF

What is PC gaming's greatest decade?

The '90s The origin of modern PC gaming. It has many of the firsts and all the bests.

The '00s Speedy internet, better PCs and shinier graphics engines produced better experiences.

EVAN: The 1990s had the CD-ROM and the McRib sandwich. The '00s had Windows XP and two terrible *Star Wars* movies. I think the latter birthed better games: the *Battlefield* series, *Crysis*, *Company of Heroes*, *BioShock*, *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Guild Wars*, *The Sims*, *Rome: Total War*, *Star Wars: KOTOR* and the best *Civilization* games happened then. What've you got, Erik?

ERIK: Lucasarts, id, Ion Storm, Interplay, Blizzard: the iconic names that created franchises that we still discuss today. "RTS," "FPS" and "MMO" had no meaning before the pioneers of the '90s came along with something other than sequels and rehashes: *Baldur's Gate*, *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Duke Nukem 3D*, *MechWarrior*, *Unreal Tournament* and every LucasArts adventure game from *Sam & Max* to *Grim Fandango*.

EVAN: This is going to devolve into who can name-drop more game titles before we run out of words, isn't it?

ERIK: Pretty much.

EVAN: Cool. In that case, let's put the best we've got on the page. What are the top three games from your decade? Mine: *WoW*, *Counter-Strike* and *Half-Life 2*.

ERIK: Just three? How about *X-COM*, *Fallout* and *The Secret of Monkey Island*. Timeless classics that we still play today.

EVAN: Is that the best that the decade that gave us the Spice Girls has got, grandpa? The innovations of the '00s will last far longer. *Half-Life 2* wasn't just the basis for the way modern action games tell stories, it's the technological foundation for the most ambitious mods we have today and the preferred canvas for machinima creators. *World of Warcraft*'s meteoric rise brought PC gaming into popular culture, ruined innumerable marriages and earned its own *South Park* episode. Top that.

In February's **"Top 100 Games of All Time"** feature, 59 games were from the '00s, 39 were from the '90s and two were from the '80s.

ERIK: Your great games are all parts of established franchises that began in the '90s. For that matter, the original *Counter-Strike* mod came out in 1999, before Valve turned it into a retail product! Take away the names that began in the '90s, the '00s would've created very little of their own.

EVAN: Megabyte for megabyte, I'd rather replay *Half-Life 2* than its predecessor. Likewise for *Diablo II*, *Warcraft III*, *Fallout 3* and other major franchises that began in the '90s but matured in the '00s. I really think that the tech of the '00s (better operating systems, fast internet, faster PCs) produced better gaming experiences. *EVE Online* couldn't exist in the '90s. *Team Fortress 2*'s dozens of free content updates couldn't have streamed down our wimpy modems—the same goes for 25-man *WoW* raids or a heavily modded playthrough of *Oblivion* or *Morrowind*.

ERIK: You've got a short memory. *EverQuest* allowed 72-man raids. And before *Oblivion* and *Morrowind* came *Daggerfall*, which was amazing and heavily modded. *Doom*, the father of modding, came out in '93.

EVAN: I'll play your game, Belsaas. Here's my ace: *Deus Ex*, our most favorite game *ever*, happened in 2000.

ERIK: *Deus Ex* is a good game…but how about *StarCraft*? Has any other game absolutely defined its genre or rallied an entire nation behind it like a sport?

EVAN: I was worried you'd play the Korea Card. What can I counter that with? The 100-million-selling mainstream success of *The Sims*? The booming popularity of independent gaming? ...*Peggle*?

ERIK: *Peggle*? Well I've got...you know...uh...*Carmen Sandiego*. Fine. *Peggle* wins. ■

The '90s brought us the Backstreet Boys, AOL and *Titanic*, and *PC Gamer* Senior Editor **Evan Lahti** can never forgive them for that.

PC Gamer Super Intern **Erik Belsaas** knows that the best games came out before he hit puberty. Twelve-year-old Erik didn't need friends when he had *Freespace 2*.

DEAD RISING 2

Chuck Greene: former motocross champ, loving father and lead man in *Dead Rising 2*. Not pictured: hundreds of thousands of ambling unpeople, ripe for gutting.

HANDS ON Grab a jackpot of weapons to save zombie Vegas

I've got a pack of jellybeans, a broadsword, $32,800, a full rack of BBQ ribs and a leafblower that shoots diamonds. This is everything I need to survive a zombie outbreak.

Dead Rising 2 is the joy of picking up items and hitting zombies with them. You're in Fortune City, a stand-in for Vegas that includes a mall, casino and sports arena—areas that are filled with hundreds of items left behind by fleeing mobs. This trove of odds and ends fashions a constant emphasis on scav-enging. Pushing past a food court restaurant called Hamburger Fiefdom, my trusty fire axe snaps in my hand as I cleave a twentieth zombie with it. In a panicked rummage, I grab anything at my feet—a beer, a basketball, a gardening rake—throwing, swatting, or drinking them to stay alive. I finally spot an oversized novelty cellphone among the debris, lifting it and letting the giant emoticon on its plastic LCD screen slap as many of the moaning shufflers as possible.

READ ME
PUBLISHER Capcom
DEVELOPER Blue Castle
LINK deadrising-2.com

I have killed zombies with Silly Bear, the 40-pound robot bear that says "I love you."

Ten hours in, I'm still finding (and crafting) new items in *Dead Rising 2*. I've killed zombies with Silly Bear, the 40-pound robot bear that says "I love you." I've done it with a vacuum cleaner that has buzzsaws for teeth. I've done it with a shotgun attached to a pitchfork (while wearing a flattering sun dress), a swordfish, a "personal massager," rotary saws, remote-controlled helicopters, squirt guns, bass guitars, boxing gloves, spray paint, skateboards, a football and a dirt bike with chainsaw wings.

Unhappily, my shopping orgies are kept in check by *Dead Rising 2*'s endless errands. The campaign is on a timer—you've got 72 hours (of in-game, magic-accelerated time) to resolve the story: gathering evidence to prove your innocence after you've been framed for the whole "thousands of zombies overrunning Fortune City" ordeal. Every side-mission and story mission has its own independent timer—if you don't attend to it quickly enough, it'll expire. Atop that, your daughter Katey needs a rare anti-zombie serum every 24 hours to keep her alive.

That's a lot of spinning plates, especially in an open-world casino-mall playground that beckons with free stuff to pick up. I definitely didn't have the freedom I expected in an open-world game—I'd be collarbone-deep in undead during a rescue mission, escorting a paramedic, construction worker, drunk stripper or grandmother back to my safe house for a massive experience point reward, then my radio would buzz with frantic alerts that I needed to complete two or three different other missions before they expired.

Being hurried along in this way does drum up tension, but it comes at the cost of exploring Fortune City's varied adult wonders at my own pace; it also doesn't jive with being restricted to saving your game within restrooms scattered throughout the town.

We're thrilled Capcom is ferrying another of its franchises to the PC. *DR2* will use Games for Windows Live for co-op and achievements (insert nervous collar-tug here), but we've wanted to throw ourselves into this gruesome blender since the original *Dead Rising* released on Xbox 360. Since we lost Duke Nukem to an apparent coma, there's been a dearth of comedy-driven action games. In *Dead Rising 2*, I can hurl a foot-long purple phallus through a doorway to repel an undead policeman. Carry on, Capcom. ■

Evan Lahti

Release SEPTEMBER 28

Smuckers strawberry-filled baseball bat: it gets the zombie out.

Guns are rare and handicapped in *DR2*, encouraging you to go hand-to-hand at all times.

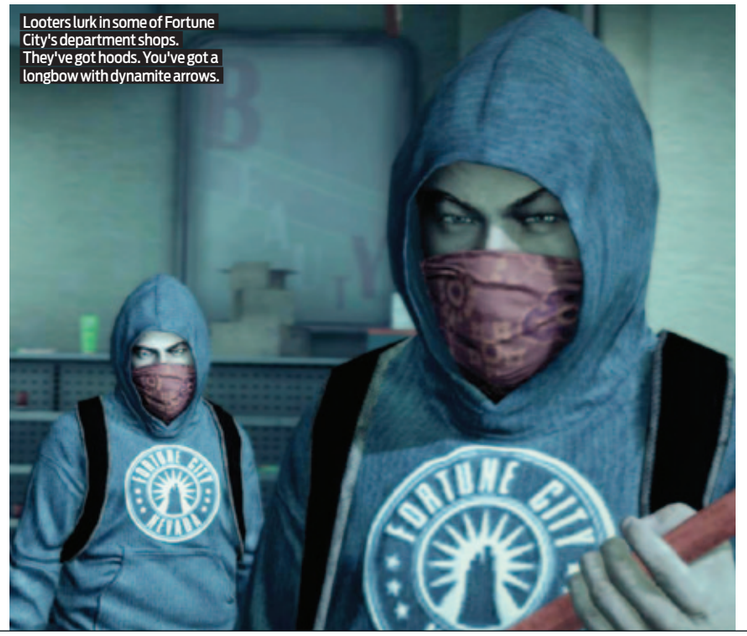
This crazed, rollerskating mascot dual-wields gas-filled squirt guns.

Zombies slow. Dirtbike fast.

Swordfish fencing 101

How to gut a zombie cocktail waitress in four easy steps

Steps: 1. Gripping your marlin at the tail, lunge beak-first at the undead dame. 2. Raise harlot into the air. Release war cry, such as "My sushi-sword hungers!" 3. Return impalee to unsightly casino carpet at maximum velocity. 4. Slip into the nearest sundress to disguise yourself, then flee rapidly.


Looters lurk in some of Fortune City's department shops. They've got hoods. You've got a longbow with dynamite arrows.

The cure for anemia: leeches. Who knew?

No joke: EA actually spent a lot of time and effort coming up with medieval Simlish.

"My name is Simigo Montoya. You killed my father, prepare to die."

In the olden days, modding was much more hardcore.

We don't take kindly to people without torsos in this kingdom.

THE SIMS: MEDIEVAL

FIRST LOOK Ye olde *Sims* prepare for adventuring in the time of kings

Hear ye, hear ye! By decree of EA, the *Sims* mega-franchise is expanding into the past. What we have here isn't merely a Renaissance Faire vacation pack for your existing pet people—*Medieval* is a stand-alone spinoff that doesn't require *The Sims 3* to play. You might not think the concept sounds so impressive, as there are already *Sims 3* tile sets in *World Adventures* that will let you build a castle and mods that dress your subjects in shining armor, but that illusion is shattered whenever their cell phones ring inside their metal pants. This is a fully-realized medieval fantasy world, complete with kings, castles, dragons, wizards and its own style of quest-based gameplay.

EA showed me a scenic landscape of trees, waterfalls, small wooden buildings and a regal-looking castle. The art style is slightly less cartoony from what we've seen before of *The Sims*, but peasant Sims roam the streets, going about their daily business, greeting each other and interacting just as they do in the existing *Sims* games. Still, this definitely isn't the same kind of open-world, do-whatever-you-want sandbox as *The Sims 3*. Instead, it's all about objectives, leveling up, score and achievements.

When you start a game, your kingdom is little more than a castle with a throne room and a few peasant houses. The game will prompt you to choose a quest from several available medieval-themed quests, such as curing an ailing king, making sure two Sims get married or slaying a dragon. Then you pick two of your available "hero" Sims—one to lead, one to assist—to solve the problem. You're given direct control over only those two Sims, and each will solve these quests in different ways. If you choose the physician as the lead problem-solver for the sick monarch quest, the task will be to examine the king, research his illness, collect ingredients for the cure and then finally administer it to save the day. If you've chosen the spy, the solution might be to simply put the king out of his misery. (The game will magically produce a healthy new one to take his place.)

As a known Sim-torturer, I see many opportunities here.

No slacking

Once the quest is completed you're given a reward of kingdom points to improve your town with new buildings. Each building comes with a new hero Sim (the full list is spy, bard, knight, merchant, physician, blacksmith, Jacobian priest, Peteran priest, monarch, wizard and physician), giving you more options for your next quest. Unfortunately, you don't build your own buildings in this one—EA wants the kingdoms to maintain that old-timey look—but you can certainly redecorate and color-coordinate using the familiar toolset. After that, you begin the quest process anew, and repeat until you finish the game.

While your heroes are tasked with solving these quests, they can't just go off and ignore your responsibilities—if the physician doesn't heal people or the wizard doesn't…wiz…they'll be thrown in the stocks for other Sims to pelt with produce, and eventually cast into the ominous-sounding "Pit of Despair," from which few ever return. It's a good thing that the occupations look entertaining—I watched the physician apply leeches to a patient on a rack-like device in a mini-game to drain just the right amount of blood to cure them. (Because that totally works.) As a known Sim-torturer, I see many opportunities here.

I'm sad to say there's no in-game dragon—the slaying, and all the knight's battles (except for sparring matches) take place off-screen. Too bad—that would've instantly spawned a project to mod fantasy fare like the forces of Sauron from *Lord of the Rings* into *The Sims 3*, which would make the game that much livelier. We'll keep an eye out for more info—like how EA is planning to handle the delicate subject of chamber pots. ■

Dan Stapleton

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER EA Sims
LINK www.thesims.com

Release WINTER 2011

THE SIMS 3: LATE NIGHT

FIRST LOOK Virtually living it up

EA is busily expanding the contemporary *Sims 3* world as well. Expansion number three, *The Sims 3: Late Night*, adds a new, more urban setting with after-hours activities for Sims. They can bar-hop all the way from dingy dive bars (with unique drinks to sample) up to exclusive rooftop VIP clubs where they'll rub elbows with celebrities, or start a band and become a celebrity themselves, living in a high-rise apartment complete with a full-service butler catering to their every whim. Plus (at long last) there will be hot tubs! There are even vampires roaming around (no word yet on whether they sparkle or not), and your Sim can become one of the nocturnal undead and feed on the living.

Will *Late Night* allow me to create a Sim-Conan O'Brien, hire him to host a talk show and then fire him in favor of a much-less-funny Sim-Leno? Time will tell. **DS**

Don't cry, little statue girl. Alice will kill everyone for you.

ALICE: MADNESS RETURNS

FIRST LOOK The rabbit hole is deep, but is the combat?

American McGee—designer of games, corrupter of fairy tales, destroyer of childhood innocence—is revisiting his most arresting work with a sequel, *Alice: Madness Returns*, and it looks to be even more endearingly wicked than the first time around. The story continues the dark tale of Alice, now a young woman recently released from the asylum, as she retreats into the labyrinth of her imagination to overcome the horrific images of her parents being burnt alive in a house fire right in front of her eyes.

Madness is both set and releasing eleven years after American McGee's *Alice*, which, while visually captivating, warranted criticism for repetitive combat. Senior Creative Director McGee assures that "[Madness] is a massive improvement on what we did the first time around," and while the mechanics are receiving an overhaul, if the body parts hanging from the ceiling and the blood pouring from Alice's mouth in the game's first trailer are any indication, the atmosphere is staying the same—a macabre combination of sound and art direction that thoroughly crack the creep-o-meter.

The sharp chimes and low echoes performed by Marilyn Manson's Chris Vrenna in *Alice*'s soundtrack have become a fan-favorite, and while Vrenna isn't returning for the music of *Madness*, Executive Producer RJ Berg insists "the sound, once again, is going to be a tremendous draw. It's not simply scene setting, but mood altering. It's allowing access to a mental state that you can't get to artistically by book or by words."

Complementing the psycho tunes is a diverse, colorful-yet-sinister world chock-full of things trying to kill you. Pointing to the hand-made look of its concept art, Berg describes the wicked Wonderland and its more than 100 characters as "crafted."

As in the original, *Madness*' sound, art, and narrative seem to be in good shape, but of course it makes us even more curious about what we haven't seen. We're looking forward to seeing what kind of moves Alice has picked up in the past decade, but there's no question that her next trip down the rabbit hole is off to an audacious start. ■

Robert Hathorne

READ ME

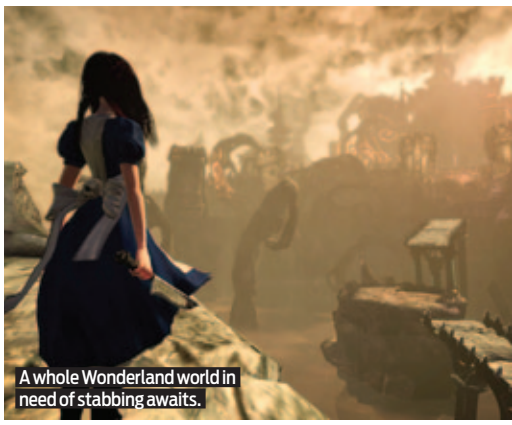
PUBLISHER
EA

DEVELOPER
Spicy Horse

LINK
ea.com/alice

Release 2011

Okay, carving out his stomach didn't stop him—what next?


A whole Wonderland world in need of stabbing awaits.

Sets look as extravagant as they did in the first game.

Familiar foe, new face. BioWare wants to achieve a more unified look with the Darkspawn in *Dragon Age 2*.

DRAGON AGE 2

HANDS-ON BioWare has a new story to tell you—should you believe it?

"It's like a Kurosawa film," begins Mark Darrah, executive producer at BioWare. I take him at his literal word as I sit down for my first hands-on with *Dragon Age 2*, and it's a bit disconcerting. Is BioWare bringing samurai to my favorite fantasy-epic?

Nope. Darrah's simply describing *DA2*'s finally-modern, higher-contrast art style. "It's about simplifying the backgrounds, making each shot be about something. The game looks more intentional in every way." Oh. So, no katanas. *Phew*.

Admittedly, my paranoia may have been provoked by the initial outbreak of confusion on the internet when BioWare revealed *DA2*. Ardent RPG players, protective of one of the most classically "PC" role-playing games they'd received in years (including *PC Gamer—Origins* was our favorite game in '09), took complaint with the some of the changes BioWare had announced. "*DA2* won't support mods!" (It might—but if it does, it'll be post-launch, BioWare told me.) "BioWare got rid of origin stories!" (Sadly true.) "I can't play as a tattooed, subjugated wood elf!" (Also true.) But I can attest that there's no reason at this time to fear that these changes indicate that *Dragon Age 2* is becoming BioWare's "*Mass Effect: Fantasy Edition*." In fact, there's no reason to believe it all—the tactical combat is still there, for example, completely intact. Lesson: Don't believe everything you read on a message board.

READ ME
PUBLISHER EA
DEVELOPER BioWare
LINK dragonage.bioware.com/da2

***Dragon Age 2* is not becoming BioWare's "*Mass Effect: Fantasy Edition*."**

Less dice, more slice

DA2 isn't an action game—its animations are now simply more taut. "Combat-wise, our big change is responsiveness," says Mike Laidlaw, lead designer on the game. "I really like the combat in *Origins*—moving the characters into position, giving orders—all that stuff was very, very key. But I also felt like the orders I was giving were being carried out like suggestions."

He's right, actually. *Origins*' animation transitions often felt uneven—I'd shield-bash a Genlock to the ground, amble over to deal a killing stab, and he'd already be back on his feet. "I want to push a button, and something awesome happens as a result. And I don't want to feel like my initiative got rolled," continues Laidlaw. "I still want to hold onto the tactical elements, but give me things faster, have people respond. Never shuffle into position and then swing your sword—*charge* into position, and attack while I do it."

That campaign to eliminate many of the lulls in gameplay from *Dragon Age: Origins* also extends to BioWare's storytelling changes in *Dragon Age 2*, which appear more significant. In place of origin stories—*Origins*' personal, self-contained preambles to the main quest that we loved—there's a single playable character: a suspiciously handsome warrior (or mage, or rogue—there are still three classes) named Hawke. He has a voice (Hawke's dialog options now take their cues from *Mass Effect* and *Alpha Protocol*, with brief summary responses selectable from a wheel in place of the actual text that he'll actually say) and, like *Mass Effect*, your main man (who can also be a woman) has a sharply defined back-story. He's human, one of the survivors of the Darkspawn's raid on Lothering, and also "the Champion of Kirkwall," a city-state north of Ferelden.

The only returning character we encountered in our demo was Flemeth, to whom BioWare's given a strange makeover. In *Origins*, she was Morrigan's wrinkled, wise parent. Here, she's clad in tight leather, with her hair wound above her head to resemble horns, and revealing a modest amount of cleavage. Weird.

While that makes us worried that BioWare will take more liberties with other character designs, it's too early to judge what the overall effect on the narrative will be. So far, the evidence shows that BioWare is trying to extract some of the breathy lore and bring a more rapid tempo to the game, inching *DA2* more towards gamers who loved the battles in *The Two Towers* instead of those who enjoyed reading Tolkien's history appendix for *Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* (that's many of us, by the way). Then again, we've only seen a single level and a single hour of gameplay so far. I can reassuringly report, however, that the orchestrating style of *DA*'s pausable combat is completely preserved. I'm feeling better already. ■

Evan Lahti

Teaming up with a duplicate of himself from the previous page, Hawke bends time and space to deal extra damage.

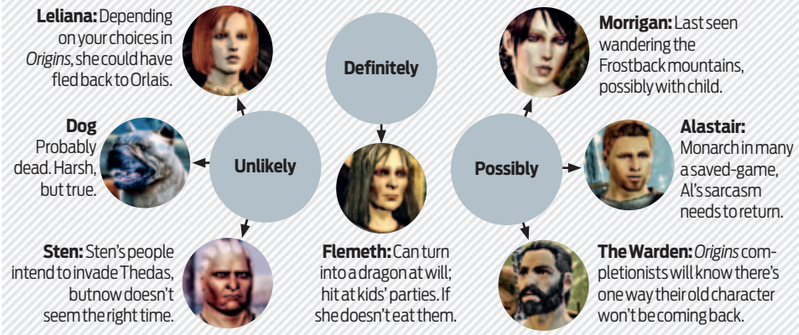
This Hurlock was booby-trapped with fireworks.

Mages: filling the air with volts so you don't have to.

Hawke. Is it wrong that I don't want to play as someone that's this attractive?

Release 2011

Old friends How likely are these characters to return in *Dragon Age 2*?



NATURAL SELECTION 2

HANDS-ON Hands-on with the beloved Source mod's sequel

Half of *Half-Life*'s legacy may be in the mods it spawned. While teams behind *Narbacular Drop*, *Day of Defeat* and *Counter-Strike* have been absorbed by the Valve blob-mind, the team behind another popular *HL* mod, *Natural Selection*, has taken a different route. They're building *Natural Selection 2* from the ground up on their own engine, Spark.

Similar to the original, *Natural Selection 2* is a 32-player asymmetrical team shooter. Human space marines turn their future-guns against an opposing group of monstrous aliens for control of space stations and planetery bases. This would be fun in its own right, as *Left 4 Dead* and *Alien vs. Predator* have proven, but *Natural Selection* adds resources, evolution and a playable commander to the human team that nearly makes it a shooter/RTS hybrid.

While the end goal is to destroy the other team's hive or command bay, most of the fighting will be over resource nodes. These nodes can be built by the human commander or the Alien Gorge and allow the commander to erect new buildings and research hurtier weapons, or let alien players evolve into nastier forms—like the 12-foot tall rhino-bear Onos.

Adding to the asymmetry, the aliens also each have unique control schemes.

By sitting inside a command module, any marine can transform the game from shooter to real-time strategy, giving him a top-down view of the whole level, allowing him research upgrades for marines and control of a pint-sized construction and weld-bot called MAC.

Because the MAC doesn't have much health, it falls on the marines to protect it from the alien team until it's finished the job of setting up structures.

The little droid can construct armories, turrets and forward bases that marines can spawn from—keeping him alive is essential if the marines want to survive to destroy alien hives. On the other side, the aliens won't have their own commander. Instead, they can evolve into five different forms, the Skulk, Gorge, Lurk, Fade and Onos, each with unique abilities.

Adding to the asymmetry, the aliens also each have unique control schemes. while the Skulk can clamber over walls and ceilings at fast speeds (not unlike playing as the Alien in *AvP*), the Gorge moves very slow, and can easily be picked off by marines' guns (or welders for ultra-humiliating deaths.) This means that, like the MAC, the alien team is going to have to defend Gorges—the only alien class that can build resource harvesters.

While it's still a very early alpha, *NS2* looks good. There's a strong emphasis on dynamic lighting in the new engine, making hiding in the shadows as a Skulk and pouncing on a marine even more satisfying than playing a Hunter in *Left 4 Dead*. Unfortunately, this is also one of the biggest problems with *NS2* right now—even with flashlights, playing as a Marine can become extremely frustrating, because there are so many dank, dark corners accesible to aliens.

Natural Selection 2 isn't an entirely new idea. Games like *Raven Squad*, *Battlezone*, *Quake Wars* and *Urban Assault* have tried to meld the FPS and RTS genres with mixed results, but from what we've seen of the very early alpha, *NS2* could claw, pummel and blast its way to be the best. ■

Erik Belsaas

READ ME
PUBLISHER Unknown Worlds Entertainment
DEVELOPER Unknown Worlds Entertainment
LINK naturalselection2.com/
TWITTER @NS2

Release WINTER 2010

Hydras have a spikey surprise for wandering marines.

The alien classes—four unnatural selections

The Skulk
Soldier. Can run fast, leap high, climb on walls and bite a marine's face off. Purely offensive.

The Gorge
Support. Can vomit out organic turrets called Hydra or heal your team with its tongue. Aww.

The Onos
The tank. Has tons of health, can stomp the ground to stun enemy soldiers and then gore them.

The Lerk
The flyer. Can swoop and glide at will, shoot spikes and create poisonous gas clouds.

Release Meter

One of the novel features of *Civilization V* is having "great people" born in your borders. There's a small amusement to shuttling Newton or Aristotle around your provinces, pushing them past your farms and gem mines—oh, right. You're not here to read about our incredible cover story. That's on page 52. You want to know when games are releasing. *[audible sigh]* Well, *fine*.

Q4 2010	
Arcania: Gothic 4	JoWooD
Battlestar Galactica Online	Bigpoint
Call of Duty: Black Ops	Activision
DC Universe Online	Sony Online
Dead Rising 2	Capcom
DeathSpank	Hothead
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Frozen Synapse	Mode7 Games
LEGO Universe	Warner Bros.
Lionheart: King's Crusade	Paradox
Medal of Honor	EA
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	Tripwire
Subversion	Introversion
Two Worlds II	SouthPeak
World of Tanks	Wargaming.net
World of WarCraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

2011	
Alice: Madness Returns	EA
Batman: Arkham City	Eidos
Battlefield 3	EA
Crysis 2	EA
Darkspore	EA
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	Square Enix
Diablo III	Blizzard
Dragon Age 2	EA
Driver: San Francisco	Ubisoft
Dungeons	Kalypso
Dungeon Siege III	Square Enix
Homefront	THQ
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	Ubisoft
Guild Wars 2	NCSoft
Jagged Alliance 3	Bit-Composer
Mass Effect 3	EA
MechWarrior	TBD
Monaco	TBD
Portal 2	Valve
RAGE	Bethesda
Rock of Ages	Atlus
Shogun II: Total War	SEGA
Space Marine	THQ
StarCraft II: Heart of The Swarm	Blizzard
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA
Stronghold 3	SouthPeak
Sword of the Stars II	Paradox
XCOM	2K Games

2012	
BioShock Infinite	2K Games
Warhammer 40,000: Dark Millennium Online	THQ

CIV-IL WAR

In one giant leap for *Civ*-kind, **SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V** takes the classic theme of replaying all of human history in excellent new directions ***by Dan Stapleton***

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Need to know

What is it?
The fifth version of PC gaming's most famous turn-based empire-building game

Influenced by
Chess, *Civilization*

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword (93%)

Copy protection
Steam

George Washington's spaceship launch must be stopped, by any means necessary. Forming an alliance with Montezuma of the Aztec Empire and Napoleon Bonaparte of France, I marshal my Roman forces and spearhead the invasion of the American islands. The battle is fierce, and soon my artillery is pounding Washington D.C.'s defenses. With his capitol lost, George won't be winning a scientific victory anytime soon—but my eyes turn to Napoleon's looming cultural victory. Do I turn on Napoleon and march to Paris alone, or rush to beat him to building the Utopia Project? Decisions like this are the essence of the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series, and *Civ V* delivers them to us in a gorgeous package.

This is anything but a lazy rehash. It feels as if someone described the concept of the renowned 19-year-old turn-based strategy series to a talented designer who'd never played it, and let him come up with his own version. It's similar enough to be familiar to veterans, different enough to be fresh, and its polish and accessibility make it a great place for new players to pick up one *hell* of a *Civ* addiction.

At a foundational level, it's *very* familiar. You begin with a single settler in 4000 BC, and over the next 6,050 years you lead your fledgling nation turn-by-turn as you found a city, research technologies, raise an army, build history's greatest man-made wonders, expand to a sprawling empire and finally make your play for world domination, all in competition with other nations. From there on up, Firaxis was fearless in slaughtering the series' sacred cows in order to make taking over the world feel new again. Judging purely by the number of nights that *Civ V* has already kept me up and playing past 3AM, psychologically unable to quit out without playing *just one more turn*, it is definitely worthy of the name.

Natural splendor

It has to be said that *Civ V* is indisputably the best-looking turn-based strategy game ever made, with or without the subtle improvements of the optional DirectX 11 effects. The painterly art style of the randomly-generated virgin landscape you see when starting a new game feels like Monet meets Google Maps, with bright colors and stunning attention to detail. Zooming in on a tile with a fur resource shows a pair of foxes frolicking together. Cattle, sheep, horses and elephants graze their respective tiles indicating sources of food, mounts and ivory, and in the hypnotically glistening ocean you can see whales breaching and schools of fish swimming beneath the surface. It's the most beautiful, lively virtual game board you've ever seen.

www.pcgamer.com

WHAT A DIFFERENCE 5,575 YEARS (AND 424 TURNS) MAKES

Nothing like a good old-fashioned artillery barrage to soften up a city before sending in the cavalry.

After four games' worth of abuse, cities have learned to defend themselves.

When nations collide, this is far and away the most tactically deep *Civilization* ever.

Wonderland

Things are equally impressive when humans arrive and start paving over the natural beauty. There are several distinct styles to cities from different cultures (Asian, European, African, etc.) and not only do the bonus-giving Great Wonders, like the Pyramids or the Statue of Liberty, appear on the map, you can actually see them *under construction*. After staring almost unblinkingly at these images for dozens of hours, I really appreciated the craftsmanship here.

Under the striking visual layer are innumerable changes to the usual *Civ* gameplay. Some seem like a bigger deal than they actually are—going in, I'd expected the most dramatic one would be the shift from the traditional map of a grid of squares to *Civ V*'s honeycomb of hexagons. In practice, this turned out to be one of the least-transformative changes—after just a few minutes of ordering around my units I barely noticed the difference, and I never once found myself pining for the old squares. Likewise, though I wasn't certain about it for the first dozen hours or so, the new super-friendly interface has grown on me quite a bit, despite its almost over-eagerness to move the game along.

War games

In reality, the most revolutionary renovation is warfare. When nations collide, this is far and away the most tactically deep *Civ* ever. In board game terms, *Civ I* through *IV* are like *Risk*, where you can stack all your armies on one space and march around the world conquering everything in your path. *Civ V* scraps that system in favor of something more like global-scale chess, where each space can only be occupied by one combat unit at a time, and some, like archers and artillery, can attack over a distance.

This changes absolutely everything about the way war is fought, and almost entirely for the better. Unit positioning matters almost as much as having the most technologically advanced military—and it's far more than just placing your spearman on a defensible hill or forest tile. You've also got to take into account if you're attacking across a river, flanking bonuses (putting two of your units adjacent to an enemy unit), any bombardment units or aircraft in range and the huge impact of the presence of a Great General. Plus, cities are now formidable combat units themselves with built-in defenses, and never give up without a fight.

It took a bit of practice to learn how to plan my troop movements to avoid slapstick-comedy traffic jams and bottlenecks, but once I got the hang of it I found it to be extremely nuanced. I had to pause and consider how to approach an enemy city, since charging in unprepared risks annihilation by an inferior but better-prepared opponent.

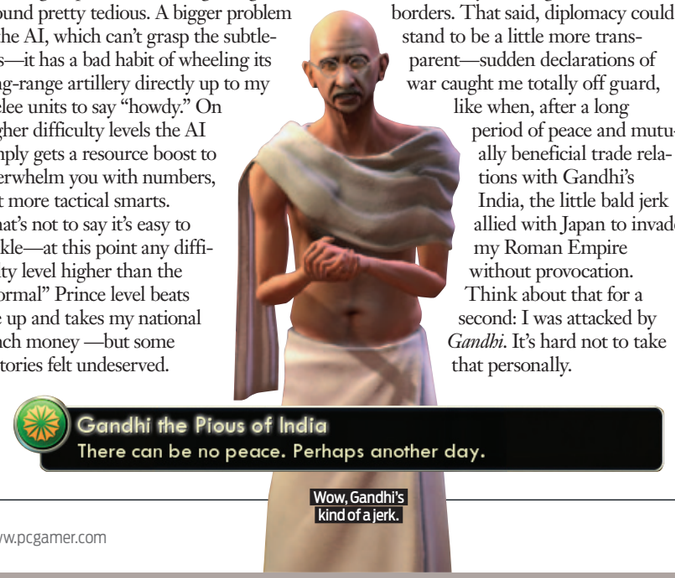
All-consuming

Combat is so engrossing that my first few games were all about conquest, even though I initially set out to win by being the first nation to research, build and launch a spaceship to another solar system. I couldn't resist going on rampages, wiping out other nations in "self defense." Oh, so I took St. Petersburg and *now* you want to negotiate peace, huh? Well *too freaking bad!* You shoulda thought of that before you decided to take a shot at me, Catherine the Great!

This is a huge step forward for *Civ* warfare, but it isn't perfect. Having to move each unit individually rather than in stacked groups makes moving a large force around pretty tedious. A bigger problem is the AI, which can't grasp the subtleties—it has a bad habit of wheeling its long-range artillery directly up to my melee units to say "howdy." On higher difficulty levels the AI simply gets a resource boost to overwhelm you with numbers, not more tactical smarts. That's not to say it's easy to tackle—at this point any difficulty level higher than the "normal" Prince level beats me up and takes my national lunch money —but some victories felt undeserved.

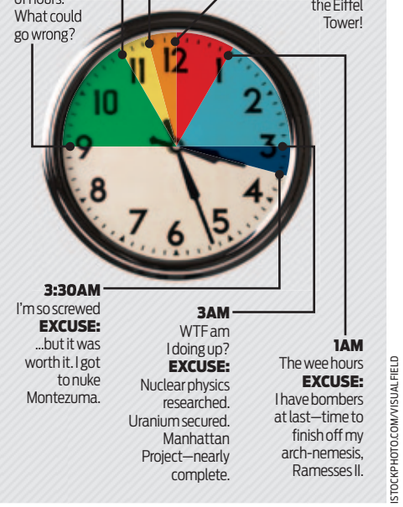
Playing against human players solves that problem, and *Civ V*'s slew of flexible options let you scale a standard game's marathon length down to a more manageable couple of hours. Sadly, the battles don't work quite as well in the confusing, simultaneous turn-based multiplayer, where all players are all moving their pieces in no particular sequence at the same time. It's messy and unpredictable, especially coming from the orderly turn-taking of single-player. It's still fun, just a little bit uncivilized.

In some ways, though, the AI impressed me. Leaders are perceptive enough to pop up and inform me that they're not going to stand for my massing armies on their borders. That said, diplomacy could stand to be a little more transparent—sudden declarations of war caught me totally off guard, like when, after a long period of peace and mutually beneficial trade relations with Gandhi's India, the little bald jerk allied with Japan to invade my Roman Empire without provocation. Think about that for a second: I was attacked by *Gandhi*. It's hard not to take that personally.



CIV'S IRON GRIP

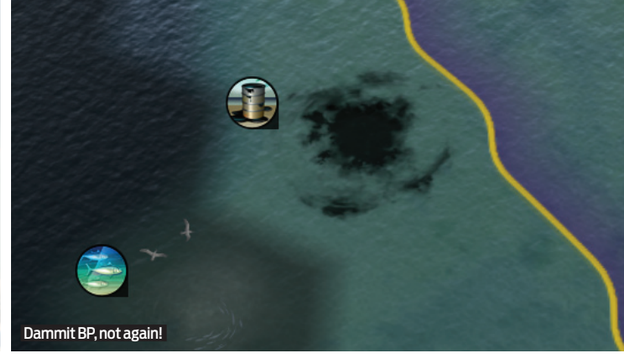
Once you've started, only the strong-willed can quit a game of *Civ*. Here's what happened to me:



ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/VISUAL FIELD

A Japanese city meets its demise at the hands of a giant robot. That's almost poetic.

If you're the first to get nukes, use 'em before assured destruction becomes mutual.


Dammit BP, not again!

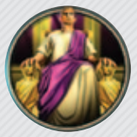
Fall behind in the tech race and you risk bringing pikemen to a B-17 bomber fight.

Washington keeps the powdered-wig look fashionable clear into the 2040s.

Max out six of 10 policy trees, then build the Utopia Project and you win via culture. *Cough* Pansy.

LEADERSHIP WORKSHOP

Civ V's leaders each have a completely unique ability. Here are what a few of the 18 available options have to offer



Augustus Caesar
(Rome)
If you build a building in Rome first, all your other cities can build it faster.

Elizabeth
(England)
Naval units get a major speed boost to out-maneuver the enemy at sea.

Montezuma
(Aztecs)
A culture of violence. Every enemy unit you kill in battle earns you culture points.

Oda Nobunaga
(Japan)
Takes a lickin' and keeps kickin'. Wounded units fight at maximum strength.

E pluribus unum

While combat has become more complex and more demanding of your attention, other areas have been mercifully simplified to prevent mental overload. You couldn't ask for better city automation tools—if you want, you never have to do anything besides pick what you want your cities to build. In a big divergence from past *Civ*s, the populations of cities don't have individual moods, but all contribute to a national happiness level that can boost you into a super-productive golden age or drag you down into stagnation. It's a simple concept to grasp, and it requires far less micromanagement because you're able to build a lot of happiness-producing structures in successful cities that balance out discontent elsewhere in your empire.

Idiot-proof politics

Likewise, the new government system does its best to avoid over-complicating itself. It's essentially a set of 10 RPG-style skill trees that allow you to shape your government over time, rather than make an abrupt shift from a republic to communism. When you've built up some culture points, you unlock policy categories one at a time, then spend points within those categories to unlock specialized bonuses that boost your economy, army, research or other trait. It didn't require me to cripple myself to experiment—some choices are better than others for certain situations, but they're all useful, and timely policy unlocks saved my bacon more than once. When I nearly drove my empire into financial ruin with military unit upkeep costs, I unlocked the base level of the Autocracy tree. Instantly my unit maintenance cost was reduced by a third, balancing the budget and netting me a nice surplus. However, in doing so, I closed off the Liberty and Freedom trees and their bonuses to population growth and culture generation. Sacrifices must be made in war.

One other area has seen a rise in complexity: I'm a big fan of the way that *Civ V* treats strategic resources like horses, coal and uranium. If I only have one horse available, I can only build one mounted unit. It makes such resources feel much more valuable and worth trading and fighting for. Technology is also precious: unlike previous *Civ*s, in this one you can't swap technologies with your allies for quick advancement, so if I didn't research it, I didn't get it. The tech race now feels even more important, and falling behind is far more dangerous.

New kids on the block

Along with bands of roving hostile barbarians, *Civ V*'s maps come pre-populated with city-states, single-city civilizations which are basically *Civ*'s equivalent of quest-giving NPCs. Keep them happy and safe, and they'll reward you with alliances, trade goods, culture points and even free military units. They may not have the personality or megalomaniacal ambition of full-fledged nations, but they're an entertaining addition—especially when they put hits out on their neighboring city-states. It's a little disappointing that pretty much the only way to reliably keep them on my side for long is to pay them to be my friend, but when I tire of their insolence I can just conquer them like any other city that crosses me.

What to do with a city when you conquer it? *Civ V* gave me an interesting new option alongside annexing my prize directly and burning it to the ground: installing a puppet ruler who would run the city as an independent subsidiary of my empire, kicking up all the profits generated but not allowing me to dictate what it builds. As I was mostly a conquest-oriented player more interested in warfare than hands-on governing, I found this option invaluable. It averts the nationwide buzzkill that comes with an occupied populace and staves off the end-game doldrums of past *Civ*s where turns got bogged down and took forever because you had to do everything yourself.

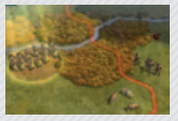
A new age

I'm going to be playing *Civ V* for a very long time. The freedom to pursue multiple victories—domination, scientific, cultural, diplomatic or simply running out the calendar with the highest score—combined with the wide range of interesting faction bonuses and unique units makes it almost endlessly replayable. I don't really see *Civ V* as a definitively "better" empire-building game than *Civ IV*, as that's nearly impossible to do; this is an equal that exists in parallel, offering a fresh, invigorating style of play with more emphasis on combat that isn't simply a repeat of what came before with better graphics. It's a whole new world with a new set of rich, intricate rules to master, and that's impossible for a strategy fan to resist picking up. Or to quit. ■

BATTLE TACTICS

Civ V's combat has a few new tricks you'll need to pick up to win the day

Flanking
Positioning two of your units next to an enemy gives you an advantage.



Cover
Bombardment units like archers can't fire over forests or hills.

Elevation
...unless you place them on the high ground (or earn an upgrade).

Great Generals
All the units in a radius around him get a major buff, but he's defenseless.

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2K ◆ **Developer** Firaxis ◆ **Multiplayer** 6 players supported, up to 18 at your own risk (technical issues may arise with more than 6 players) ◆ **Link** www.civilization.com ◆ **ESRB** E

VERDICT

Gorgeous graphics, deep combat and a user-friendly makeover makes the fifth *Civilization* a great place to start or renew your interest in global domination.

PC GAMER 93

IMMORTAL

There's no question: **STARCRAFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY** was worth the wait *by Tim Edwards*

Need to know

What is it?
An ultra-traditional RTS with a fleshed-out campaign and a huge, fanatical multiplayer following

Influenced by
Command & Conquer, Warcraft

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850

Alternatively
Supreme Commander 2 (89%), *Dawn of War 2* (86%)

Copy protection
Battle.net (must sign in online to play)

This is Blizzard's most-polished game to date.

Forget *StarCraft*'s reputation as a punishing multiplayer click-fest played only by adrenaline-powered Korean pro gamers. *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* includes a lengthy single-player campaign that's compelling for everyone, alongside some of the best multiplayer and co-op functionality I've ever seen. It looks, sounds, plays and feels like a game you may have loved from over 10 years ago—the original *StarCraft*—offering a kind of baffling but welcome nostalgia. When you sit down to play it for the first time, if you're a PC gamer of any experience at all, you'll immediately understand what's going on, and what you need to do to succeed.

Yet this is clearly new and modern. It has a slick and gorgeous interface, beautifully textured backdrops, 7.1 surround sound and superbly integrated achievements, leagues and challenges. Office workers will discover that their saved games travel from home to their work PC and back again thanks to cloud saving. And yes, frustratingly, it continues the trend of requiring you to be online to play, even in single-player, and omits offline LAN play in the name of combating piracy. At least you're not booted out mid-mission if you lose your connection, so it's a little better than Ubisoft's system.

Raynor shines

Let's examine that campaign. You play as Jim Raynor, former space marshal, current space-cowboy freedom fighter. He's world-weary, hard-drinking and grizzled, having faced multiple threats to the galaxy ranging from Terran dictators to the repellent Zerg—squishy cartoon bugs that can infest a planet and tear it apart. And there are his old sparring partners and occasional allies the Protoss, a race of mystical blue space-elves who helped Raynor battle his Zergified former love interest Sarah Kerrigan, now known as The Queen of Blades, four years prior. Now the Zerg are advancing again, the Terran dictator is being a jerk, and it's time for Raynor to raise a new army.

And what an army. In the campaign you (mostly) lead Terran forces—metal-clad space warriors that charge into battle with a cigar fixed firmly to their bottom lip. I love the Marauders: burly robot-suited men with rocket launchers for hands. I adore the Siege Tanks, artillery which drive into position, plant feet firmly into the ground and pound away with upturned cannons. I think the basic Marines are hilarious, particularly when upgraded with a riot shield and dosed with stim packs (they run faster, shoot quicker and die easier). And I've got a complete soft spot for the Firebat: a single-player-only heavy soldier with a flamethrower on each arm.

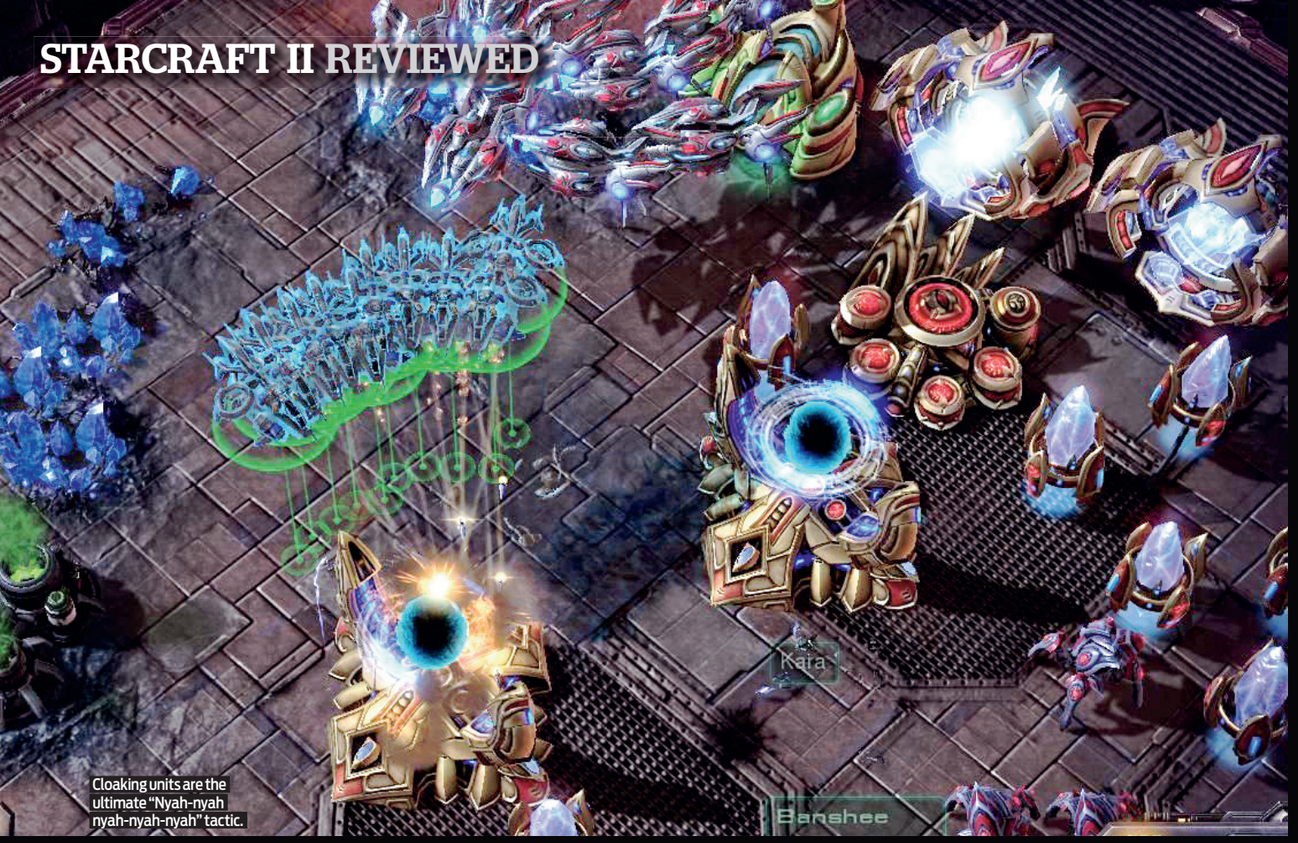
Terran units ooze expression, and not just in their barked responses to your clicks. It's in their art and animation—they jog into battle, arms swinging, eager to please, until they die in glorious balls of red goo. When a tank takes one too many rounds, it doesn't just fall apart, it's ripped to pieces in an explosion. *StarCraft II* is intensely readable—the results of every artillery shell and flamethrower burst is instantly apparent.

Given the retro feel of the game, you'd expect the campaign to be unsophisticated. Since the dawn of the genre, RTS missions have mostly repeated the same simple formula: secure a base, ramp up production by harvesting resources, hold the fort until you've got a walking ball of death, and then burst through enemy defenses and destroy their base. This lack of imagination has been slowly strangling the life out of the genre.

StarCraft II's superb campaign shows us how it's meant to be done. Its 27 missions, each lasting 30 to 45 minutes, each contain a unique twist or idea that raises it above a simple base push. Early on, you're asked to exterminate a Zerg infestation. By night, hundreds of Zerg-infected zombie humans shamble towards your gates. Surviving until morning means filling bunkers with Firebats and Marines, and then praying that they hold until morning.

As the sun sets and rises every five minutes there's a gorgeous transition, with each little soldier casting a long purple shadow. When the sun bursts through, the poor "zergbie" souls flail and wave as they roast alive. You can see the effort that has gone into every little model, every tiny animation. It also serves as your cue to push out with Hellions—buggies with flamethrowers—to torch the infested colony.

The zombie mission might be a standout, but it's not alone. I enjoyed nearly every mission, including a raid on a prison planet that played out like a beginner's version of *Defense of the Ancients*: you control a single overpowered hero while waves of AI-controlled Marines, Medics and Marauders throw themselves at the defenses. Then there was the race for resources where I was fighting over scrap metal to buy off a vast mercenary army. When you can finally afford the bribe, their unstoppable regiments are turned over to your control. Or there's a last-ditch defense of a planet marked for extermination, where a Protoss



Cloaking units are the ultimate "Nyah-nyah nyah-nyah-nyah" tactic.

"If only I could reach that bottle over there."

The revolting sound effects that accompany the Zerg really sell their squishiness.

Like jetpacks? In *StarCraft*, even your *buildings* have jetpacks.

"Welcome to Crazy Swann's! What can I do to put you in a Firebat suit today?"

Gabriel Tosh: invisible psychic sniper pirate. That's quite a resume.

Every time you beam in a Protoss unit, you have to yell "Energize!" Well, I do, anyway.

It'll take an army to crack my defensive line of Bunkers and Siege Tanks. Bring it on, Protoss!

Kerrigan was hotter as a redhead.

Mothership bent on vaporizing human colonists can only be shot down once you've defeated three well-guarded bases.

None of these objectives can be completed by simply selecting everyone and sending them forward, which is great, because that solution wouldn't be fun. The joy here is in figuring out the right combination of soldiers to send forward to best neuter the opposition, and *StarCraft II* delivers the most entertaining options, and the most entertaining solutions I've seen in any RTS campaign. Selecting 10 Siege Tanks and sending them toward a Zerg base isn't a guaranteed win—they might out-range the Spine Crawler defenses (which skewer units on horrific fleshy spikes), but they'll get chewed up by flying Mutalisks. You'll want a mixed force of vehicles and infantry, tailored to the situation. Maybe a group of air-to-air Vikings to take out any fliers, supported by Marauders on the ground. When the fliers are down, the Vikings can sprout legs and transform into armored walkers.

Adding to the challenge, you might not have access to the optimal unit mix at the time, since you have to unlock them as you go by completing missions. You might have to improvise—which, it turns out, is all kinds of fun.

Plot doctor

Surprisingly, *StarCraft II*'s campaign allows for a certain degree of choice. Once you're past the introductory missions, in which Raynor gathers his forces, you're usually allowed to choose between two or three different missions. Each ties into a different character's storyline: there's Tychus Findlay, an absurdly muscled Marine recently released from prison—he's being paid to find alien artifacts; there's Ariel Hanson, a scientist babe trying to save her fellow colonists by searching for a cure to the Zerg infection; and there's Gabriel Tosh, a mercenary-cum-voodoo warrior with a dark secret. (He likes dolls.) The writing might not be that sharp, nor the characterization more than ludicrous butch cliché, but it's passable.

Most of *StarCraft II*'s stories end with a choice of finales. Do you release prisoners from a high-security prison, or shut down the secret program they were recruited for? Do you allow the Protoss to purge a world, or save the colonists from certain death, even though they may be infected with the Zerg virus? The level structure allows you at least minimal choice, and therefore to engage better with the overarching storyline. And even though we already know that *StarCraft II* is going to get two expansions in the next couple of years, few will feel shortchanged by the ending here, or the sheer number of missions.

How stories play out, and the rewards for completing missions, are brought to life by *StarCraft II*'s gloriously over-the-top point-and-click intermissions, which remind me of the beautiful between-mission interfaces of such ancient PC games as *Descent: Freespace* and *X-Wing*. You don't simply select missions, research unit upgrades or hire mercenaries from simple menus. As Raynor, you go to the laboratory, bridge, armory or cantina

The fun is in figuring out the right combination of soldiers to send forward to neuter the opposition.

Zerg rush

When will you make the first push?

Tier one
An early rush led by cheap, squishy Zerglings, with Roaches as support.

Tier two
Hydralisks on the ground, Mutalisks in the air. Hoard lots of Vespene gas for this.

Tier three
Brood Lords rain down tiny melee units, clearing the way for giant Ultralisks.

Terran Supply Depots are excellent at getting in everybody's way.

A couple of Zerglings can ruin your day if they get into your base early.

Aw man, *nothing* gets that red goo out of your clothes.

All space pirates enjoy a game of *Gal Civ XXXVIII*.

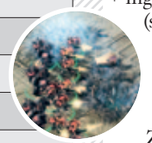
Destroying Protoss Pylons turns off the lights on their buildings. No power, no new units.

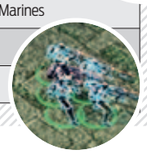
Raynor is world-weary, drunk and grizzled.

Learn the lingo

How to talk *StarCraft* like a native

APM	Actions per minute
Exp	Expansion base
gg	Good game
glhf	Good luck, have fun
Micro	Detailed unit management
Macro	Economy and expansion control
Mech	Terran force of mechanized units
MnM	Terran Medivacs and Marines
Rax	Terran Barracks
Ref	Gas refinery





aboard his flagship Hyperion and make selections using computer consoles. The end result is the same, but this is window dressing of the best kind: pure atmosphere. I'm an absolute sucker for this sort of silliness—I could spend hours just clicking on the TV in the bar and watching the fake propaganda news broadcasts from the oppressive Terran Dominion.

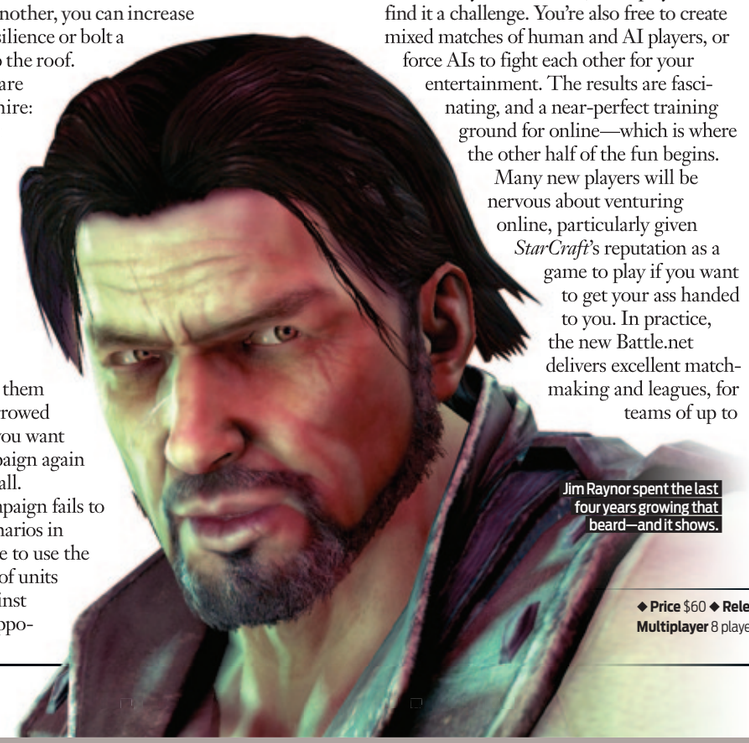
Research & development

I was also pleasantly surprised at the choices available when customizing my army. At its most basic, you can purchase upgrades for your favorite units and buildings, like timed charges for your Reapers (shock troopers that can jetpack into the back of a base) or a permanent cloak for your Ghosts (elite infantry that can call down nukes). There's also research, earned by collecting Protoss relics and Zerg DNA. Two separate tech trees, one for Zerg, one for Protoss, offer parallel development routes. At five-point intervals, you're asked to make a permanent choice to upgrade your army. At one branch of the Zerg tree, you can pick a heavy transport or robot dogs. At another, you can increase your Bunker resilience or bolt a mounted gun to the roof. And then there are mercenaries to hire: elite troops that can be dropped into the battlefield.

Making these choices, spending your scarce cash, is hard. Every option is useful, and trying to choose between them will lead to a furrowed brow. It makes you want to play the campaign again to sample them all.

What the campaign fails to do is deliver scenarios in which you're free to use the complete range of units and abilities against competent AI opponents. That's where the skirmish mode comes in. The AI is ferocious: occasionally rushing, sometimes holding back with a mixed army. On medium, most players will find it a challenge. You're also free to create mixed matches of human and AI players, or force AIs to fight each other for your entertainment. The results are fascinating, and a near-perfect training ground for online—which is where the other half of the fun begins.

Many new players will be nervous about venturing online, particularly given *StarCraft*'s reputation as a game to play if you want to get your ass handed to you. In practice, the new Battle.net delivers excellent matchmaking and leagues, for teams of up to four. The sides feel relatively evenly matched, and any cheesy rushes have easy-to-remember counters. There are far more Terran players online in the lower leagues, since people gravitate to playing the race they know from the campaign, but they're certainly not dominating.


Jim Raynor spent the last four years growing that beard—and it shows.

Millions of words will be expended on whether certain units or combinations are unbalanced, but it can all be summed up in one sentence: *StarCraft II* is more than ready for competitive gaming. What flagrant imbalances there might've been were addressed in an epic-length beta period.

The best way of describing the joy of playing *StarCraft II* online is this: even if you win, you're usually left exhausted. The mental effort required to scout your opponent, match their economy, build a counter and execute a battle plan will leave you drained. If you lose, the mental effort is the same, sometimes greater. But I never left unhappy—I simply wanted to learn where I went wrong, how I could improve and what to change next time. If I won, I wanted to jump back in and prove myself again.

New or nervous players have plenty of opportunity to learn in the practice league. These starter matches are played on modified anti-rush versions of the maps, and don't contribute to your overall ranking. When you feel you're ready, you play a short series of placement matches, where the game evaluates your skill and drops you into one of three leagues where you'll be matched against similarly skilled players.

Yes, *StarCraft* is competitive, but the community is friendly and receptive. Most matches online are preceded by a "glhf" (good luck, have fun) and even the loser will usually concede with a "gg" (good game).

That's slightly inaccurate, however, as this isn't just a good game—it's a *great* game. Playing it, repelling wave upon wave of Zerg in the campaign, bullying your way up the league rankings in the relentless multiplayer, or just hanging around in the luxurious campaign intermissions, is to be reminded that the PC is now and always has been the most vital, and most exciting gaming platform on the planet. More please. ■

◆ **Price** $60 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Blizzard ◆ **Developer** Blizzard ◆ **Multiplayer** 8 players (Battle.net only) ◆ **Link** www.starcraft2.com ◆ **ESRB** T

VERDICT

A gloriously well-crafted campaign welded to a near Olympic-level competitive experience. *StarCraft II* is essential.

PC GAMER **93**

Vito relies on the typical *mafioso* triple-threat: punching, shooting and scary staring.

Need to know

What is it?
An open-world third-person shooter set in the world of organized crime in the 1940s and '50s

Influenced by
Mafia, GTA IV

Play it on
Quad-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/ Radeon 4850

Alternatively
GTA IV: Episodes from Liberty City (89%)

Copy protection
Steam

WISE BUY

MAFIA II tells a good story, but if you want to tell your own, fuhgeddaboudit! ***by Rich McCormick***

Decades of classic mob films and six seasons of *The Sopranos* have taught us certain indisputable facts about life in the legendary Italian-American organized crime group known as the Mafia. Fact one: Mafia men do lots of killing. Fact two: they like suits. Fact three: *mafiosa* don't call each other *mafiosa*; they use the term "wiseguys."

I've cross-referenced facts one and two with the cover-based mob shooter *Mafia II*, and the game definitely holds true—there's a lot of killing and a lot of suits. Fact number three, however, does not. "Wiseguys," with its implied street-smarts and cunning, doesn't fit *Mafia II*'s mobsters. It certainly doesn't fit the mid-level gangster the game asked me to tail early in its middle act, who didn't have the presence of mind to check his rear-view mirror as he drove away from a literal hatchet job. Had he done so, he'd have seen Sicilian-born WWII vet and new-boy mobster Vito Scaletta about 20 feet behind him, dressed in a garish red-and-white Hawaiian shirt and driving a hot-pink corvette. That guy was not very wise.

Wise up

The loudly dressed guy was me, and I was trying to be *too* wise. My first attempt at tailing the escaping mobster ended in failure after my original car choice—an inconspicuous '50s sedan—was outpaced with ease on the highway. I chose that car, snatched off the street with a bit of minigame lock-picking, to suit the mission description, which led me to believe that my mark would notice anything too obvious. But after he'd bashed his own vehicle a total of six times against anything and everything in his pre-programmed path, I realized that such caution on my part wasn't entirely necessary.

Vito himself is neither a literal wiseguy nor a sympathetic character. Upon returning from the war he joins the local Mafia, even though his mother told him not to. Naughty. In his new job he relies upon menace through the typical *mafioso* triple-threat: punching, shooting and scary staring. Likewise, his best-buddy Joe starts off likable, occasionally dipping a toe into comic-relief territory, but then ducks back into "a bit nasty" land by shooting a whole bunch of people.

The rest of the supporting cast eschews any chance to get really creative, instead furnishing the game with another layer of dark-suited, dark-haired professionals, hitmen and higher-ups that blurs into one indistinguishable mass when the game takes Vito away from the city itself. They succeed in trapping Vito in a series of ever-widening shells, each step up the Mafia ladder (a ladder made of guns), each with a new set of faces to watch in cutscenes…but they're all congealed clichés, as culled from a hundred *Bronx Tale*s and *Godfather*s. The dialog is well written and excellently acted, but it feels mechanical—like the spoutings of a scriptwriting supercomputer with all its dials set to "Lightly accented macho threat."

City of dreams

The robotic behavior of its actors effectively harpoons *Mafia II*'s illusion of real life, but the fact that I bought into that illusion in the first place is the game's greatest strength. It was the city that drew me in: an amalgamation of New York's streets and Hollywood's hills, Empire Bay is as interactively sterile as all other open-world game cities, but it possesses a veneer of credibility. Each street and

Police brutality

Empire Bay's finest at work

Speeding
If you're spotted cruising above the speed limit, you can elect to pay a fine...or just flee that cop's vision.

Crash
Smashing into a cop car, or something squishier, will bring the law down on you—unless you pay a small bribe.

Kill
Kill a civilian and your life is forfeit. You can escape the local cops, but you and your car will remain wanted.

Spree
Creative massacres mobilize swathes of police who won't stop shooting until you've gone down.

"Wakey, wakey!"

One of us is going to have to change.

"I HATE TRAFFIC JAMS. RAAHH!"

Just because you're wearing boxers, doesn't mean you have to start a boxing match.

Hitting the gas tank makes a big bang.

Mafia hug!

hallway has a feature to remember it by—a man shouting at an open window; a woman pressing her ear to a door; the sound of an argument. It adds up to a genuine rhythm, a pulse that *GTA IV*'s Liberty City lacks. Plus, it helps that it is (on hefty machines) visually stunning. Visit the city in a mid-war winter and the streets are caked in snow, with layered bands of crystalline white on the untrodden paths contrasting with slush on the roads. The lights! Even as the game transitions out of the 1940s and into the '50s, *Mafia II*'s waxy lighting remains consistently arresting, casting pools of gold and yellow on to car windshields.

But there's no point to any of it. The game is presented in chapters, and each begins as Vito wakes up in his home. (Vito, I have learned, is a man who sleeps in the same vest and pants for nine years.) Before the poor, smelly guy can even get dressed, he's hit with news and a job. The game forces you drive to a location; once there, Vito either shoots some men, punches some men or drives somewhere else.

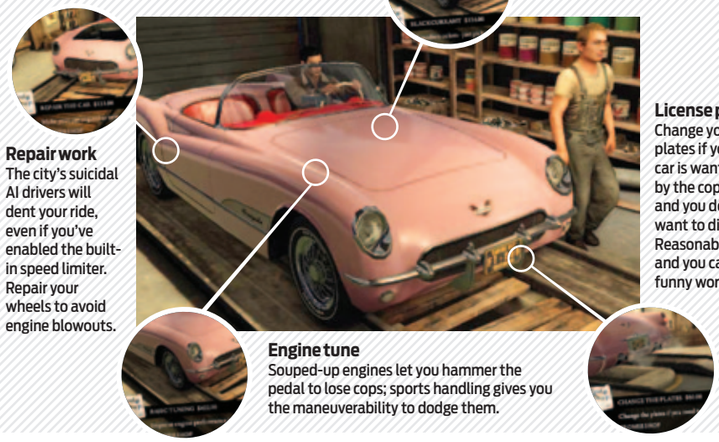
I'd drop into the homes and workplaces of my contacts, their cheery local Mafia man. Need any guys whacked today? Anything stolen? Want me to punch a lady? I was good at all these things. But, always, no. You can rob shops, but it won't procure much loot. You can harass civilians, but will only get police pressure for your trouble. For a city dripping with incidental detail, the game slapped on top of it has none. Not that this is a broken promise—2K Czech never made any claims about *Mafia II* being anything but a linear experience—but when the city looks so inviting, it's a shame you can't do more.

Moving violation

Unless you make your own fun, that is. I enjoyed people-watching in a city where every AI pedestrian and car driver has the situational awareness of a frightened rabbit. Drive near one and their preset avoidance reaction kicks in, launching them in a seemingly random direction. Sometimes, this would be toward safety; more regularly, they'd hurl themselves into speeding traffic.

Body shop

Pimp your ride in the city's garages



Color change
A fresh coat of paint won't make your car go faster, but only a comfortably badass man can rock this pink.

Repair work
The city's suicidal AI drivers will dent your ride, even if you've enabled the built-in speed limiter. Repair your wheels to avoid engine blowouts.

License plates
Change your plates if your car is wanted by the cops and you don't want to ditch it. Reasonable rates, and you can write funny words.

Engine tune
Souped-up engines let you hammer the pedal to lose cops; sports handling gives you the maneuverability to dodge them.

Seeing a woman who a few moments earlier was happily strolling down a sunny street chuck herself in front of a nearby van is certainly a surprise. Having that van then swerve to avoid her and plough through three other pedestrians is *hilarious*. Watching as that van is spotted by police, who open fire before getting squished by the panicked, bleeding van driver, is better than any "kill 50 goons" story mission I've ever played.

And those missions are all too regular in *Mafia II*. Combat is a pleasing system of gunplay that leads to weighty, inaccurate firefights, heavily reliant on ducking behind cover. The enemy AI, so stupid at the wheel, doesn't redeem itself in battle. Bad guys just pop up and down from the same spots behind cover like sharply dressed moles—whacking them is simply a matter of waiting.

Early in the storyline, *Mafia II* displays a convincing reluctance to murder indiscriminately. This was the time I built my connections and prepared my lip for wobbling when my friends went to sleep with the fishes, as all Mafia friends invariably do. But then, three quarters of the way through, it forgets all that and puts you up against waves of baddies, dehumanized after all that work to build Empire Bay's factions into tangible, realistic groups.

A dirty job

Mafia II is a mob movie run once through a game grinder, and that's simultaneously the worst thing about the game and the compliment it was clearly developed to attract. In telling a story as convincing as most Hollywood depictions of the *Cosa Nostra*, 2K Czech has done exactly what it set out to do. Only at the end does the artifice topple slightly, under the weight of a few too many clichéd battles. Detach the story from its very familiar housings, and we're not left with much: a bit of walking, a lot of driving and too much shooting. Each is good, but rarely superb.

Even supported by a tight script and great voice work, *Mafia II* is walking a path that's been paved in gold by film's best. On that level, it can't compete. On the level where it can—exploring Empire Bay—*Mafia II* shows an unwillingness to try. It's a compelling experience, but not so persuasive an offer that you can't refuse. ■

Seeing a woman chuck herself in front of a nearby van is certainly a surprise.

VERDICT

The perfect tribute to the mobster movie in 10 hours of criminality. It could've used a bit more "game" in the mix, though.

PC GAMER 78

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2K ◆ **Developer** 2K Czech ◆ **Multiplayer** None
◆ **Link** www.mafia2game.com ◆ **ESRB** M

BIG BROTHER

BLACKLIGHT: TANGO DOWN is a tension-packed online shooter, but it targets its own foot with bad matchmaking ***by Chris Comiskey***

Need to know

What is it?
An affordable, futuristic online FPS with a focus on weapon customization

Influenced by
CoD4: Modern Warfare 2, Unreal Tournament III

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/ Radeon 4850

Alternatively
Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (81%)

Copy protection
GfWL

I'm being watched. All the time. It doesn't matter if I hide, run or sneak—they can see me, and they're coming to kill me. It's an exhilarating sensation.

It goes both ways—by enabling the Hyper Reality Visor (HRV) I can detect every other player's location for five seconds…but I render myself defenseless during that time. It's a constant risk-reward dynamic, and it adds a level of tactics and intensity rarely seen in an online first-person shooter. At least, it does when you can actually find enough people to play with—lack of available competition is one of this near-future military shooter's most irritating faults.

Because, for all the features *Blacklight: Tango Down* unabashedly cribbed from *Modern Warfare 2*, it also imported the worst: a lobby-based multiplayer matchmaking system in place of dedicated servers. Instead of searching for populated games in progress that you can join instantly, you enter a randomly assigned lobby and wait for at least five other people to join up before a match can begin. All too often, I spent 30 to 45 minutes waiting. You *can* start private matches with friends, so if you bring your own teammates you'll be saved some pain. Some, but not all, because with Games for Windows Live, even simple text chat is a challenge. You can play the brief single-player and co-op campaign without the lobby hassle, but that's not the reason you'd buy *Blacklight*.

21-gun salute

That reason being: once you're in deathmatch, everything else about *Blacklight* is wondrous. Cover up the $15 price tag, and it feels nothing like a budget shooter. As you gain experience and rank up, specialized components are unlocked for your five main guns and three sidearms—and when you fire these weapons, you'll feel and hear their gravitas. The shotgun kicks like a Clydesdale and brings fools down with a single shot, and the assault rifle booms like a series of thunderclaps. Every weapon comes with a caveat—the SMG loadout lets you run like The Flash but lowers your health, while the light machine gun slows you down but boosts your weapon damage and ammo capacity. Half the fun is mixing and matching various parts on a single gun and testing the outcome in battle. Wanna mod a revolver into a silenced, long-range sniper rifle hybrid? It's like playing with weaponized LEGOs, and that's just as fun as it sounds.

Intelligent design

Despite the powerful equipment unlocked at higher levels, some superb game design keeps victory within reach for new players. If you're a reasonably talented FPS player, you'll never be unfairly overpowered by *Blacklight* veterans. I never felt cheated by being cornered or outnumbered, as all the levels contain multiple escape routes, and there's always an appropriate obstacle nearby to take cover behind. Sound plays a big role in evening the odds—when you get near a foe you'll hear their distinctive radio chatter, alerting you to their presence, and of course there's the HRV, which makes camping so suicidal that you might as well just shoot *yourself* instead.

If not for the artificial barriers that so painfully prevent me from playing when I want to, *Blacklight: Tango Down* could've been a masterpiece. Alas, 15 minutes wasted waiting for the action to start is 15 minutes I could've spent playing another game. This is gameplay worth waiting for, but it's a black mark on *Blacklight*. ■

Killing you loudly

Four ways to get tango-downed

Superb game design keeps victory within reach for new players.

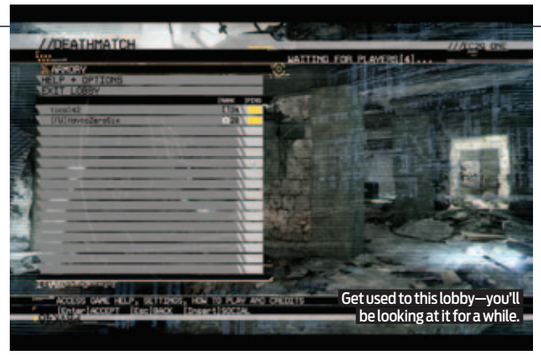
◆ **Price** $15 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Ignition ◆ **Developer** Zombie
◆ **Multiplayer** Four player co-op, 16 players versus ◆ **Link** www.playtangodown.com ◆ **ESRB** T

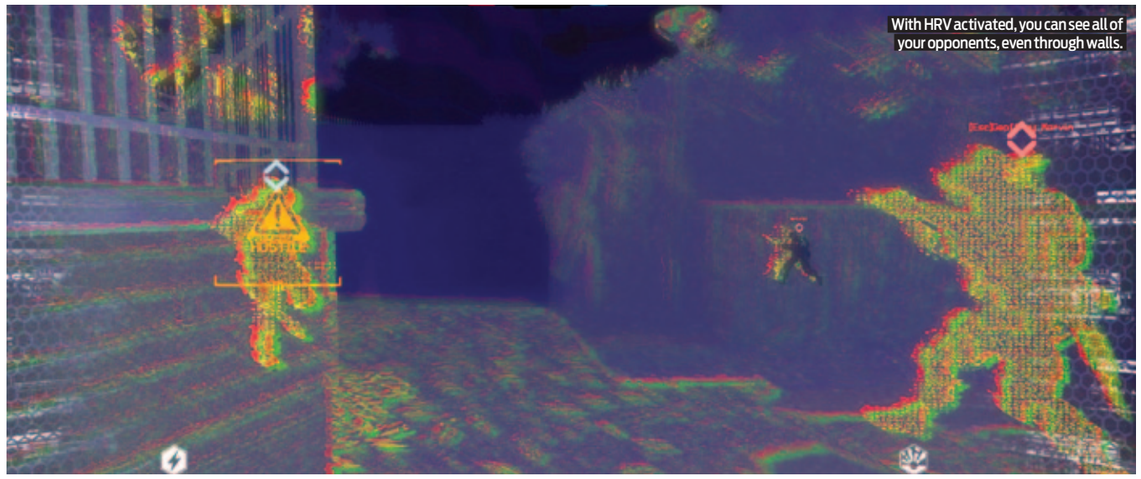
VERDICT

B:TD is a great online shooter when it gets going, but an awful lobby system makes that way harder than it should be.

PC GAMER **83**

I'm so excited to get into a game I fire off a whole clip in celebration.


Get used to this lobby—you'll be looking at it for a while.


With HRV activated, you can see all of your opponents, even through walls.

There's always cover available (like that bus to the left). Use it!

ABLE

Crime thriller **KANE & LYNCH 2: DOG DAYS** flashes more cinematic style than shooter substance ***by Craig Pearson***

Need to know

What is it?
A single-player and cooperative third-person shooter

Influenced by
Freedom Fighters, YouTube

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/ Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Splinter Cell: Conviction (87%)

Copy protection
Steam

Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days is a standard third-person shooter with amazing art direction. For every gun blast blocky artifacts pop up, corrupting the image like it was filmed on a cheap video camera and uploaded to YouTube. Lights smear vertically, and the viewpoint lurches like the cameraman is running along behind the player. It's *brutal* on the senses, but it's startling enough to make me like the game more than I should.

You're the psychotic Lynch. You get a job in Shanghai, and ask Kane to help out. Within 10 minutes of meeting you've accidentally murdered the daughter of a powerful crime baron, and must spend the rest of the game fleeing his minions. From then on it's Shanghai versus you—gangsters, corrupt police and eventually the army are in the way.

It's at least a better shooter than the first game, but it still has major problems. Running through a market, pushing up against tables, blind-firing over the top and tossing explosive gas cans—this is all stuff games have done for years. But with Lynch's inaudible gibberish, Kane's reliable presence as the buddy AI (or co-op companion) and Shanghai's neon lights bending and warping under the fantastic-yet-maddening digital distortion of the YouTube filter, the visual style shoulders far more weight than the substance of the gameplay.

Under cover

Dog Days is heavily cover-based, so it relies on spaces filled with cleverly disguised low walls (or cars, or ice-blocks). That's not a problem if it works, but the cover still feels insubstantial, like there's always a bit of your body exposed to the enemy. This was a big problem that made the original's gun battles a miserable experience, and while I've only died a few times under cover this time around, they've yet to make cover *feel* like a tactical advantage. At least it goes both ways: in one restaurant fight, the flimsy wall sections break under fire. Blasting at the corrupt cops to force them out of their crumbling cover? That was fun.

But such moments are rare. There are twists, and when they arrive they show just how good IO is at coming up with disgusting, funny scenarios (you're naked and bleeding for one level), and Shanghai is used beautifully, but the game mostly sticks you in large spaces with inaccurate weapons. You only get what guns you can scavenge, so there's no comfort when you do find a gun that's accurate—you'll eventually run out of bullets, and unless you kill an enemy using the same weapon, you'll need to swap it for another. Conceptually it fits into your mad dash for freedom, but it chips away at the fun a little bit.

I'm not a rat, you're a rat!

The various multiplayer scenarios (Fragile Alliance, Undercover Cop and Cops & Robbers) use paranoia as a game mechanic, telling a gang of bank robbers that they can make more for themselves if they take out their allies and grab the loot. Undercover Cop even asks one player in the gang to foil the heist without being exposed as a traitor. As the cop, I once got caught because my "teammates" noticed I wasn't shooting the police, and they weren't firing at me. It'll be interesting to experience that particular mode with online strangers, as, amazingly, there are bigger jerks than me out there. But fun as it is, multiplayer suffers from the same problems as single-player.

IO is heading in the right direction, and if the base game mechanics were tighter, *K&L2* could have been astonishing, but this is a 65% game with a 90% art style. ■

It's at least a better shooter than the first game, but it still has major problems.

Friends close

How to tell if a friend's about to betray you

1. They hold back, trying to keep a view of the team rather than the enemy.
2. They don't fire at the police, which might mean they're the undercover cop.
3. They do their best to be alone with you, to murder you out of view.
4. They run ahead, which means they can bribe the getaway driver to abandon you.
5. They're named Logan, Evan, Josh, Erik or Dan.

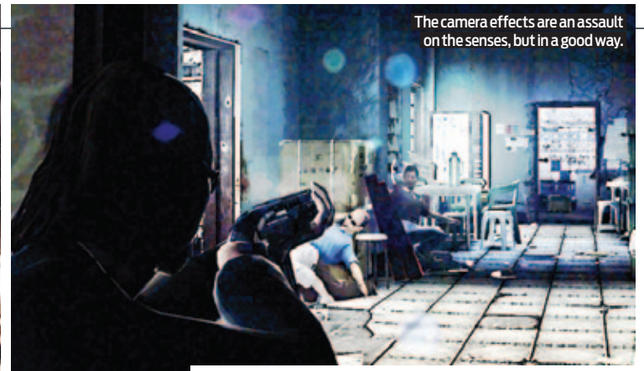
VERDICT

An amazing technical achievement, but *Kane & Lynch*'s shooting and cover systems need an overhaul to fully realize its potential.

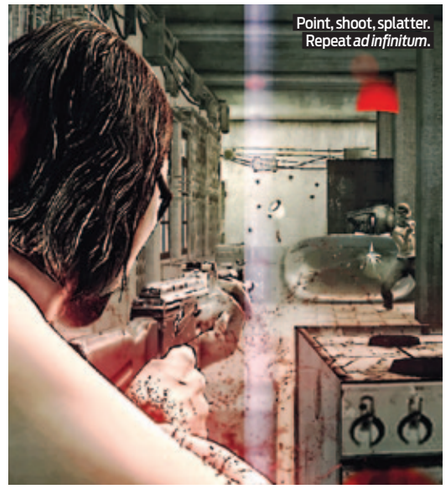
PC GAMER **70**

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Square Enix ◆ **Developer** IO ◆ **Multiplayer** 2-player co-op, 12 players versus ◆ **Link** www.kaneandlynch.com ◆ **ESRB** M

Everything in the game looks great, except for Lynch's awful hair.


The camera effects are an assault on the senses, but in a good way.

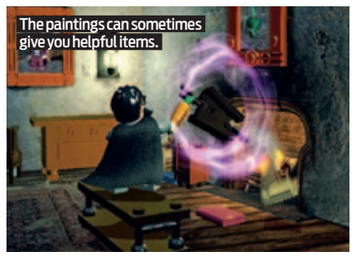
Shanghai: come for the food, stay for the beautiful urban scenery.

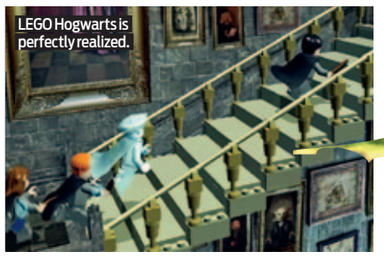

Point, shoot, splatter. Repeat *ad infinitum*.

You vs. Shanghai. Right now, it looks like you're winning.

It was only a matter of time: Harry's gone nuts.

Giant magic chess is so much better than regular chess.


The paintings can sometimes give you helpful items.


LEGO Hogwarts is perfectly realized.

BLOCK MAGIC

Battle Voldemort and Stupefy friends with a carrot in **LEGO HARRY POTTER: YEARS 1-4** *by Tom Senior*

Need to know

What is it?
A side-scrolling action puzzler set in the wizarding world of *Harry Potter*

Influenced by
J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books

Play it on
2.4GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GT/Radeon 4850

Alternatively
LEGO Batman (85%)

Copy protection
Steam

LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4 plays like a secret lost chapter of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*—a bizarre chapter where boy wizard Harry goes mad with power, puts on a fake mustache and runs giggling through Diagon Alley, turning people into ice cubes with a wand that looks like a carrot.

Everything he zaps explodes, uncoils or is reshaped. Scattered bones are reassembled into dancing cadavers, a couch jumps to life and gobbles up a child, a chess game plays itself to checkmate. *LEGO Harry* is the plastic boy-king of a cartwheeling world that entertains at the slightest prod of a magic wand.

The game covers Harry's first four years at Hogwarts, and the format will be instantly familiar to anyone who's played a *LEGO* game. It's a side-scrolling platform puzzler in which Harry and his chums make their way through a plastic Hogwarts, using their unique talents to break down obstacles and progress through the major events of the books and films. Ron can take control of his pet rat, Scabbers, and send him into pipes to hit hidden switches; Hermione can decipher bookcases; Harry's a *maestro* on a broomstick; and Hagrid...well, he's really big.

Piece-ful

The addition of a number of learnable spells adds some much-needed complexity to *LEGO*'s usual brick-bashing. If your character has a wand, they have access to a wheel of enchantments, each of which gives you a new way to interact with the world, from your Expelliarmus magic missile to the Wingardium Leviosa, which can levitate bricks and build stuff as needed.

Due to Harry's pacifism, the combat of previous *LEGO* games is more or less absent. Most areas are peaceful room-escape problems, often with ridiculous solutions.

In one scene, I used telekinesis to reanimate a skeleton, which then produced a fishing rod and pulled up a giant squid, which proceeded to squirt water to form a bridge to the exit. It's unpredictable and insane, and likely to be endlessly hilarious for kids. For adults, zapping everything until the door opens may get old towards the end, but the slapstick humor and the bazillion collectibles provide their own compulsive pleasure. Gathered items can be exchanged in shops for new spells, bonus levels and cheats that grant you the giant mustaches and carrot wands.

LEGO Harry Potter had my inner child doing delighted backflips. Whether I was laughing at Hermione's hilarious broom-riding animation or totally not-on-purpose casting Stupefy on my co-op partner for the tenth time, it's willfully silly and fun. For young *Harry Potter* fans, this is a glorious celebration of the saga. For *LEGO* fans, this game is up there with the best of the series. ■

VERDICT

A joyous and addictive action puzzler. It's packed full of brilliant spells, animations and an infectious sense of fun.

PC GAMER **85**

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Warner Brothers ◆ **Developer** Traveller's Tales
◆ **Multiplayer** 2 player co-op ◆ **Link** bit.ly/legoharry ◆ **ESRB** E10+

WAR CRIME

Bugs render **MAKING HISTORY II: THE WAR OF THE WORLD** ungovernable *by Tim Stone*

You sank my battleship... and my ability to enjoy this game.

How naive of me. I'd assumed the "II" in the title of this turn-based WWII grand strategy goliath signified that it was a sequel. Now that I've played the thing, I realize it's a reference to the framerate.

On a dual-core system, *MHII* moves with the natural elan of an arthritic badger. Scrolling the pretty global map is like trying to spread chilled butter on soft bread. You could open a can of beans in the time it takes to open a city menu, and load a dishwasher in the time it takes to load a saved game.

The feeling that something is deeply wrong intensifies the more you play. For my first foray into 1930s geopolitics I chose "The German Question" from the three available scenarios, and France from the list of 80-odd playable states. Seventy laggy turns later (one turn equals seven days) I'd conquered most of continental Europe, including the Third Reich and Mussolini's Italy, and done it all without building a unit, using an airplane or garrisoning a captured territory. I didn't so much feel like I was making history as mocking it.

Game two was slightly more plausible. This time I opted to play as a techno Franco. Spain, sitting aloof from WWII, was to be transformed into a scientific powerhouse. Fifty turns in, with most of the huge tech tree still towering above me, I gave in to temptation and invaded Portugal and Ireland. The British Alliance responded forcefully—credibly even—with an amphibious landing in Belfast. *MHII* was just beginning to show a smidgeon of promise when a crash undid all the good work.

Sessions three and four ended in the same frustrating fashion; this game just wasn't ready for release. Another year or so in the code-womb might have given Muzzy a chance to debug, inject a little more sense into the strategies of AI states, properly balance the five-resource economic system and flesh out woefully weak areas like diplomacy, ideology and espionage. Even the absurd 20-page "manual" found in the boxed version of the game is about as much use as Chamberlain's Munich souvenir.

This is Muzzy Lane's Dunkirk. I reckon the devs and their game will eventually recover, but it's going to take a lot of blood, toil, tears and sweat. ■

PC GAMER **30**

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Muzzy Lane ◆ **Developer** Muzzy Lane ◆ **Multiplayer** 32 players
◆ **Link** www.making-history.com ◆ **ESRB** E10+

THROTTLED

It makes a fast start, but it's not long before **NEED FOR SPEED WORLD** starts to run out of gas *by Tom Senior*

Need to know

What is it?
Online open-world racing packed with power-ups and persistent leveling

Influenced by
Need for Speed Most Wanted

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 8800GTX/ Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Burnout Paradise (85%)

Copy protection
Tied to EA.com account

A whole city is yours to explore in *Need for Speed World*, a game that claims to be a free-to-play racing MMO. In reality, it's only free up to level 10, and it's not an MMO. For the first 10 levels it's an open-world arcade racer with a great sense of speed and amazing police chases; travel past that point and things start to slip.

There are two types of activities available in the city: races and pursuits. Completing them earns money and reputation, which unlock new cars and courses. Single-use power-ups, tailored to the event you're involved in, are also randomly dropped at the end of each event. Racers gain special abilities such as nitro boosts and traffic magnet—an assassination move that causes traffic to swerve into the path of the race leader. Pursuit specialists have access to a different set of powers.

Pulling up to a glowing race marker kicks off a contest with up to seven other players. It's accessible, fast and addictive for a while, but the lack of handling subtlety robs its races of replay value. It was never going to be to be a simulation, but the perfect racing line always takes second place to raw speed and gratuitous power-up usage, meaning there's little incentive to master the courses, and the outcome often feels decided by luck.

Hot pursuits

The pursuits, however, are brilliant. Ramming a police car flings you into an instanced version of the city where you'll find yourself hunted by an army of angry cops. Power-ups and environmental hazards can be used to outwit your pursuers, and every crime you commit earns more rep. It's an intense, relentless mode that makes good use of the whole city, and single-handily justifies downloading the free client. It's a shame that the most fun you can have in *Need for Speed World* is on your own.

To progress past level 10 you have to buy the Starter Pack for $20, which raises the level cap to 50, giving you access to the most powerful cars, more tracks and vehicle customization. I found getting from level six to 10 to be a grind in itself, and the lure of more powerful cars wasn't enough to pique my interest. Customization options are purely aesthetic. Car tuning consists of upgrade packs that provide a choice of three identical stat upgrades which look slightly different. Outside of the decal system, there was nothing I could to do make my car feel like my own.

Money matters

There are also microtransactions, and this is where things get silly. At any time you can spend the game's paid-for currency, SpeedBoost, to buy power-ups at about 20 cents a shot or, ridiculously, to rent a super-car for three days. These cars are far more powerful than the cars you can earn, and can be taken into any race without restriction. I rented a Lamborghini for just under 1500 SpeedBoost, which is the equivalent of $3.75. Yes, that's $3.75 to rent a virtual car that disappears after three days.

Need for Speed World can never be a serious competitive game with these overpowered, overpriced super-cars roaming its streets. You're better off downloading the free client, seeing the sights and enjoying the great pursuits by your lonesome. ■

VERDICT

A fun arcade racer with outstanding car chases, sideswiped by shallow driving and outrageous microtransactions.

PC GAMER **69**

It's a shame that the most fun you can have with *NFSW* is on your own.

Shake your tail

Losing the cops in *Need for Speed World*'s pursuits

Problem
They're not quick enough to catch me, so now they've set up a good old-fashioned road block.

Solution
Juggernaut activated! My car becomes a wrecking ball, and I scatter them like bowling pins.

Problem
The cops are getting all up in my grill, trying to block me off and take me down.

Solution
I activate Emergency Evade, and all nearby cops are flung away. Freedom, and the open road, awaits!

Problem
Spike belts! The coppers have thrown down the sharp stuff. My tires are shredded.

Solution
I activate the Run Flats power-up, and my tires magically reinflate.

◆ **Price** Free up to level 10, $20 thereafter, plus microtransactions ◆ **Release** Out now
◆ **Publisher** EA ◆ **Developer** Black Box ◆ **Multiplayer** 8 per race ◆ **Link** bit.ly/c1v5Y3 ◆ **ESRB** E10+

There's a terrific sense of speed to the races.

Nitrous boosts peter out after a few measly seconds.

The higher your wanted level, the flashier the cop cars.

On your marks, get set, mircrotransact!

Floating stop signs? Has the whole world gone mad?

Oh yeah, check out that 8x anti-aliasing! Those card edges couldn't be any smoother.

A physical card collection like this would cost a fortune.

I'D TAP THAT

Fun is in the cards in **MAGIC: THE GATHERING—DUELS OF THE PLANESWALKERS** *by Robert Hathorne*

Need to know

What is it?
A faithful adaptation of the *Magic: The Gathering* collectable card game

Influenced by
Magic: The Gathering

Play it on
2.4GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, GeForce 6800GT/Radeon 9700 Pro

Alternatively
BattleForge (81%)

Copy protection
Steam

I'm a master of the forest, and all things of it yield to my command. Right now, my legion of Blanchwood Armored Grizzly Bears prepares to siege the opponent's ethereal Wall of Air, defended by a snarling and muck-laden Denizen of the Deep. All my preparation comes down to this moment—if only I knew what was in his hand. Oh well. *Attack!*

Okay, so maybe playing *Magic: The Gathering—Duels of the Planeswalkers* isn't that dramatic, and it's certainly less visual than most games. In fact, you don't *see* anything of what I just described, only well-illustrated cards making their way to and from the "battlefield" as turns progress. That's just it: *Duels* is great *because* of its simplicity, and its unerring replication of the trading card game it's based on, presented cleanly on your screen.

If you've always wanted to try the card game but never committed, *Duels* serves as an excellent primer. With a thorough glossary, an excellent tutorial and a huge collection of cards whose real-world retail value would far exceed what you'll pay for *Duels*, there's little reason to abstain if you're curious.

I cast Silence

Somethings that you should turn off right away are the music and battle animations. The animations are essentially a sound-and-lights show to represent combat, but the result is tedious at best. The music, on the other hand, is comprised of weird, icky Moroccan electronica doodles that are as pleasant as vinegar in the eye I'd describe the "lose" chime as wet poop and the "win" chime as a swinging scythe followed by pigeons in a vacuum cleaner. Avoid prolonged exposure.

Duels' showpiece is the single-player campaign, pitting your pre-made theme deck against increasingly difficult AI decks. That's right, I said "pre-made." Despite mountains, plains and swamps of goodness, *Duels* manages to omit the hallmark of trading card games: deck customization. Rather than let you build your own deck from the huge library of cards baked into the game, *Duels* starts you with a few decks and lets you unlock new cards and decks along the way. When you unlock new cards, you can only decide to add or remove them; you can neither remove cards from the starting deck nor adjust the amount of land in your deck. It's a big oversight, but it doesn't spoil the entire game—there's plenty of other stuff to do.

Up to four players can battle it out online, or you and a friend can take on two AI decks in local co-op. There's also a wonder of a challenge mode that drops you into a game in progress and asks you to win in a single turn. It gets stupidly hard, but it's also equally satisfying when you win the challenge.

Duels is a gem that embraces the simplicity of the game, minimizes crap and adds enough flesh and variety to yield a great experience that keeps you coming back. ■

VERDICT

A great place to learn the ways of *Magic*. The lack of deck customization is appalling, but it nails the card game experience.

PC GAMER **80**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Wizards of the Coast ◆ **Developer** Stainless ◆ **Multiplayer** 2-player local co-op, 4-player versus ◆ **Link** bit.ly/OaIOe ◆ **ESRB** T

Riding solo is lonely, but it's the best way to play *Toy Story 3*.

BUZZED

You've got a friend in **TOY STORY 3: THE VIDEO GAME** *by Erik Belsaas*

If you'd told the child version of me that a game would come along which would capture the fun of playing with toys and your friends, I'd have called you crazy and kicked you in the shin (I was a brat). Yet Avalanche has managed to successfully digitize much of that childhood playtime joy in *Toy Story 3*.

The star of the show here is Toy Box, a free-roaming, mission-based *GTA*-for-kids mode that places you in the boots of Woody, Jesse or Buzz Lightyear. You're the sheriff of a toy town, but your job is more than just maintaining law and order. You get called in to help all of its citizens with anything and everything, from rounding up cattle and tossing Army Men onto targets to mining gold and horse racing. There's a huge variety of tasks, all introduced using simple, kid-friendly missions that build their way up to fairly difficult scenarios. If you don't feel like doing quests and just want to mess with the townsfolk, the town is completely customizable. I freely walked around putting giant *Finding Nemo* fish fins on all the buildings and dressing up citizens in bizarre Wall-E costumes.

This toy world stops just short of satisfying my playtime urges, though. The three-hour story mode is fine, but mostly serves as a way to loosely tie the game to the movie, and is really overshadowed by Toy Box mode. Disappointingly, co-op is only present in story mode; it would've been tons of fun to play the many modes of Toy Box with friends or children. Not helping anything, the graphical settings are severely limited for no apparent reason—resolution maxes out at 1280x720, resulting in an image that only uses half the pixels of a 1650x1080 display. This game could've looked almost as good as the films on a nice PC, but it looks barely passable instead.

While *Toy Story 3* may not be all that it could've been, there's still a lot of enjoyment to be had while interacting with the *Toy Story* cast of characters in their natural environment. It'll certainly keep children (or children at heart) entertained for hours, especially those who are already in love with the franchise. ■

PC GAMER **76**

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Disney ◆ **Developer** Avalanche Software ◆ **Link** bit.ly/toystory3game ◆ **ESRB** E10+

Ziggy Stardust attack!

Dumb aliens fail to put up a fight in **ARMADA 2526**

Many great games have been built on the concept of expanding your space empire through diplomacy, trade and war. *Armada 2526* is not one of them.

Your empire requires more monitoring than a two-year-old with a welding torch, thanks to inelegant menus that double your workload. *Armada*'s RTS combat is disheveled; odd textures, bizarre scaling and a jumpy camera make gameplay that's already frustrating even worse. Plus, enemies are no fun to fight due to dumb AI, and the aliens look as ridiculous as they sound—imagine a cricket dressed as David Bowie. ■ ***Justin Mahboubian-Jones***

PC GAMER **49**

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** bit.ly/arm2526 ◆ **ESRB** E10+

Explosions are pretty. More so when it's an enemy unit.

Bleak **FUTURE WARS** gives us nothing to look forward to

In the future, battles are fought by turn-based flying robot drones. This game isn't without nuance and tension; winning requires positional awareness and wearing down the enemy.

But what a unit is and whether it's useful against another is far from obvious at first glance—when you can't even tell whether something is a ground unit, it's hard to know how terrain will affect it. Trial and error quickly establishes the order of things, but it doesn't help that the game's own strategy suggestions seem ineffective. *Future Wars* takes a well-worn template and executes it with little more than mediocrity. ■ ***Martin Davies***

PC GAMER **58**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** bit.ly/futwar ◆ **ESRB** N/A

The Cybermen are back... and they're wearing pants!

DALEKTABLE

Hide from Daleks in DR. WHO: THE ADVENTURE GAMES—EPISODES 1 AND 2 *by Erik Belsaas*

Despite being the longest-running science-fiction show on TV (forgiving the 1990-2004 "hiatus"), the UK's *Doctor Who* never got much more presence on the PC than the show has in the US. Luckily for us Whovians, (yes, that's what we fans call ourselves), the BBC has come to the rescue by materializing a new episodic adventure series.

The first two episodes of the UK taxpayer-funded third-person adventure game have made their way over the pond as a single package, available through Direct2Drive. The majority of your time is spent playing as the time-traveling alien know-it-all Doctor (as played by Matt Smith), looking for clues and items, talking with characters from the show and solving basic item-combination puzzles. Occasionally more complex puzzles are presented, involving breaking a code or completing circuits without crossing wires, but nothing that will make you break a mental sweat. Stealth moments are a pleasant surprise—the Doctor isn't one for violence, and using the terrain and obstacles to sneak past iconic nemeses like Daleks and Cybermen add moments of tension to *DW:TAG* that most adventure games lack.

Designed to be extra "episodes" tied into the plot of the 2010 season of the series, the first two episodes do a respectable job of fitting into the story. Each begins with the show's theme song, and the plot structure and writing parallels the flow of the show identically. Every character is lovingly animated, with voice acting by their small-screen counterparts, adding an air of authenticity. Unfortunately, these episodic chunks are nearly as short as a couple of TV episodes—each takes around two hours to finish, and left me wanting more (in the bad way).

The graphics engine also left me wanting more, since it looks like it just time traveled from 2003. This is really unfortunate, because better lip syncing and good textures could've really made this game shine.

Whatever you do, don't think of this as a starting point if you're new to the series. *Doctor Who* faithful will love what *DW:TAG* presents, (including a gigantic load of fan service, like collectable emblems that unlock facts and bios about the show's many characters and locations) but if you're just looking for a self-contained adventure to click your way through, you'll be as confused as a Trekker at a *Babylon 5* convention. ■

PC GAMER 68

◆ **Price** $5 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** BBC ◆ **Developer** Sumo Digital ◆ **Link** bit.ly/acUU2y ◆ **ESRB** N/A

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
A glowing example within its genre of excellence in design and execution.

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Monkey Island 2 SE (90%)
October '10

Sleep is Death (90%)
July '10

LOVE (86%)
July '10

Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising (91%)
May '10

Mass Effect 2 (90%)
March '10

BioShock 2 (90%)
March '10

Left 4 Dead 2 (92%)
January '10

Dragon Age: Origins (92%)
Holiday '09

Batman: Arkham Asylum (93%)
December '09

Resident Evil 5 (93%)
November '09

1 Gender realignment

MODS HELPING YOUR **TEAM FORTRESS 2** MODELS FIND THEIR FEMININE SIDE

There are a wealth of seedy *Team Fortress 2* reskins and remodels: large, jiggly breasts and an abundance of upskirt shots seem to top most modders' checklists. Being the respectful gentleman that I am, I've skipped all that, choosing instead the best female reimaginings of the existing classes—taking key characteristics and incorporating them into a new gender. But, y'know, they're ladies with guns, so they're still hot. To use these models, unzip the file contents into your "team fortress 2/tf" folder (for voices, unzip to the "tf/sound" folder). Delete them when you want to reaffirm your masculinity. **EL**

Female Medic

The first of *TF2* skinning mega-champ Chemical Alia's (aka Shaylyn Hamm) submissions, this fräulein riffs on the same German stereotypes as the game's vanilla versions. Have a look at bit.ly/bkh5XX for a detailed breakdown of her creations. The character pack comes with full voiceover, too.

SIZE 18MB LINK bit.ly/alBSMT

Female Scout

This one *does* have a notably short skirt, flouting the rules I laid down. Facially, she's not a huge step away from the original Scout, softening the jutting jaw and toning down the punchable face. No voice pack in this one, but there are custom gibs and face poses.

SIZE 3MB LINK bit.ly/aZHJ2V

Female Heavy

Chemical Alia's femme-Heavy is a departure from the regular bald lump, retaining only the Heavy's bear-like physique . Again, there's a full set of voice work, but that must be downloaded and installed separately. Get audio here: bit.ly/bAxCfk.

SIZE 5MB LINK bit.ly/b1psfr

2

WEBGAME

FLOAT ON

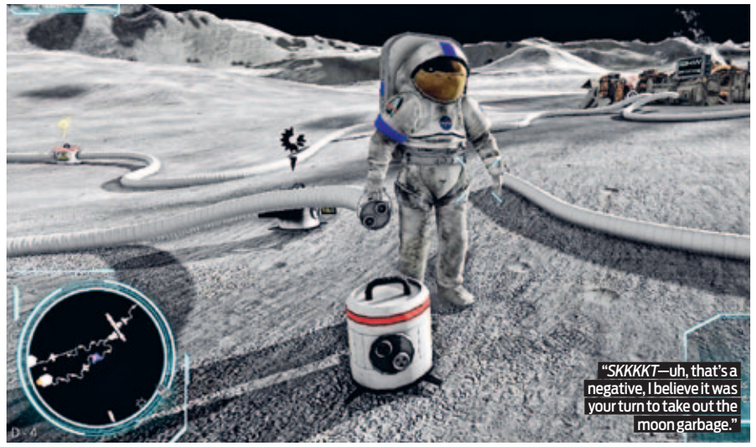
UNDERWATER PHYSICS IN *PIXELOTL*

Sea-dwelling axolotls can regrow their yanked-off limbs, but there's no such gruesome loss of appendages offered in this sedate platformer. Playing as an underwater amphibian, it's your job to rescue your axolotl chums from the clutches of a stork. The same cosmic force that imbued your little water-creature with a sense of agency has also given him the power to affect gravity—convenient when the path to salvation is paved with floaty bubbles.

There's no gruesome loss of appendages in this sedate platformer.

These bubbles wobble slightly when touched, but most are stuck in place and let your axolotl clamber onto them. Others need a bit of coaxing—altering gravity next to them swooshes them up or down depending on their color, letting you solve simple puzzles to reach the stage's exit. **RM**

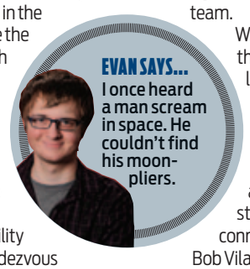
SIZE Browser-based
LINK bit.ly/aLfbGd



4 Space to breathe

FREEWARE COLONIZE THE HEAVENS IN **MOONBASE ALPHA**

You'd think the average John or Jane Q. McAstronaut goes up to the moon to get away from the nagging realities of daily life—pay your gas bill, fix that light in the hall, wear trousers when you leave the house—but even orbiting the Earth at some ridiculous distance, the little jobs won't do themselves. Made with NASA's involvement, *Moonbase Alpha* doesn't include moon-aliens or space-critters—this is realistic base-fixing as done by small groups of astro-buddies. It's 2025, and NASA has built a facility on the moon's south pole. You rendezvous with the moonbase's existing staff, witnessing a meteorite strike that knocks out power and life support. It's up to you and your waddling friends to put the base back together, reattaching wires, soldering connections and to save the stranded team.



When you create a game, you'll set the size of your co-op crew—create a larger server and you'll have six people with astro-toolkits but more jobs to do. There's a strange dichotomy between the ambient niceness of the largely silent moon and the time-limited jobs on offer—steady-hand minigames and fiddly connecting jobs that make you feel like Bob Vila in low gravity. **EL**

SIZE 1.2GB LINK http://bit.ly/caDOlP

5

FREEWARE

BUT IS IT ART?

POND

I really want to ruin *pOnd*'s twist for you. But I can't, because it's the sole reason *pOnd* exists.

POnd describes itself as a "Zen breathing game." It's a single-button game where you press and release the spacebar to regulate the breathing of your in-game character. Or is it?

As the game begins, a solitary man emerges from his lonely log cabin and slowly wanders across a pixellated meadow. He continues through glade and woody dell, breathing in the splendor of nature. Nature, in this case, is circles of yellow light which flow into his mouth when you tap spacebar. Hold it too long and you'll choke, flashing red and ruining the serene experience.

The "are games art" argument is easily answered.

The "are games art" argument is easily answered with this five minute game. Yo, Roger Ebert! Play *pOnd*. You too, everyone else. **CP**

SIZE 39MB LINK bit.ly/pOndpcg

3 Dismember me

MOD **LEFT 4 DEAD** MASHES UP WITH *HL2*'S EERIEST LEVEL

"We don't go to Ravenholm" is very good advice. It's also the name of a new campaign for both *Left 4 Dead*s. There're two versions—identical, map-wise and both set in the zombie-filled township of Ravenholm, nabbed from *Half-Life 2*. Obviously Ravenholm's undead surprise is a little less pronounced in a game built on killing as many zombies as possible, but the campaign's creator warplane11 has done an airtight job turning the level into a proper *L4D* experience.

The original level was a pure example of Valve's expert pacing, and warplane11 should be lauded for keeping most of that experience intact. *L4D*'s breakneck pace means the full campaign takes longer than Ravenholm itself, and into sunlit areas that are no less overrun by zees.

Before you install the mod with *L4D2*, you'll need to download "*Left 4 Dead 2* add-on support"—find it in Steam's "Tools" tab. **RM**

SIZE 67MB LINK bit.ly/b2qege

MACHINIMA

The teaser for **Beyond Black Mesa** fills in the gaps after *Half-Life*

A teaser for a fan-made indie short film, "Beyond Black Mesa" will tell the story of Adrian Shephard and pals as they escape Combine forces and warn the world about the impending invasion. **RM** *bit.ly/9WWz56*

Halved-Life

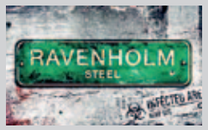
1 Shephard is fleeing from unseen forces. The Combine's distorted voices can be heard over the soundtrack. Note the lambda symbol on his arm.

Tick tick boom

2 BBM's post-production nailed the *Half-Life* series' classic effects. Shep tosses a grenade backward at his pursuers, and it trails *HL2*'s trademark red glow.

Cover system

3 The Combine's speaker-voiced soldiers appear, supported by scanners and a Strider. Luckily, Shephard can run—most of the trailer is taken up with sprinting.



We don't go...

4 To Ravenholm. The teaser's final shot is a slow pan into the blighted town's sign, indicating the eventual short will move into the overrun settlement.

Setup and use DOSBox

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Moderate
TIME One hour

VITAL LINKS

DOSBox installer file (v 0.74)
bit.ly/c3JPy9

D-Fend Reloaded front-end utility
bit.ly/cZNkfP

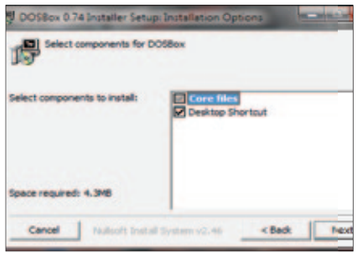
D-Fend Reloaded preconfig game packages
bit.ly/aCoOsx

REPLAY ALL YOUR FAVORITE DOS GAMES BY FOLLOWING THESE EASY STEPS

BY CHRIS COMISKEY

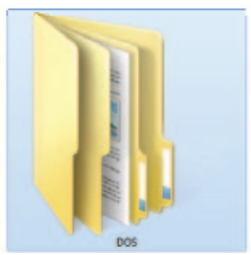
If you're running Windows Vista or Windows 7, many of PC gaming's classic games just won't work. But there's no reason to abandon those gems when DOSBox exists. DOSBox is an emulator at heart—it recreates the command-line operating system that older games needed to function, and it's compatible with most MS-DOS games out there. Even better, DOSBox won't overwrite or interfere with your existing OS; it opens just like any other program and runs in the background. There's also a ton of community support, and many folks have contributed to help make DOSBox more stable and reliable than ever.

It's also a cinch to use. While there are dozens of commands, there are only a few basic ones you'll need to learn. But if command lines just aren't your thing, or if you'd like to avoid tinkering with graphics and sound settings once a game is installed, there are also front-end utilities—like D-Fend Reloaded—that simplify the overall experience. Read on, and you'll be playing *Duke Nukem 3D* in no time!



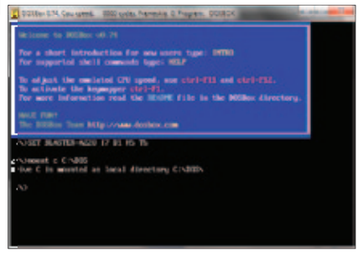
1 Download DOSBox

Whether you're running D-Fend Reloaded or the embedded DOSBox command lines, there are a few crucial steps to follow before you can successfully use either program. To start, download the DOSBox package (see Vital Links) and double-click the installer file. Click Next, leave Core Files and Desktop Shortcut checked and click Next. Leave the Destination Folder field at its default setting, and click Install. Let the program setup, and click Close to finish.



2 Root directory

Before you open DOSBox, you'll need to create a root directory to store games. Open a Windows search field by selecting the Windows icon in the lower left of your desktop, and type in **C:** and press Enter. Right-click inside this new window and select New and then Folder. Name the folder DOS. From DOSBox's standpoint, this is where all your unpacked games will hibernate when not in use. The default method—installing games to **C:\Program Files**—can be problematic. Don't do it.

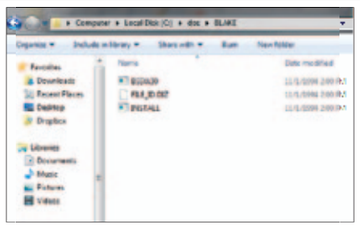


3 Advance warily

Double-click the DOSBox shortcut on your desktop. Two windows should open. The one you need says "DOSBox 0.74" at the top. This is where you'll type all your commands. The one command you'll use most is **mount**. Essentially, this command creates a virtual DOS "hard drive" inside the target directory on your PC, where you can run those old games. To connect your DOS gaming folder to DOSBox's internal C: drive, type: **mount c C:\dos** and press Enter.

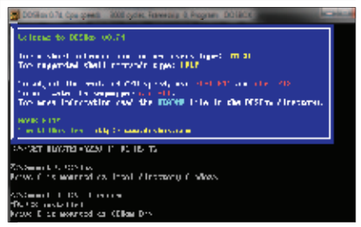
4 CD game setup

There are two ways to prep your games for installation if you have their original discs. You can open up your CDs and copy all of their contents into a main folder inside the previously-created DOS directory, or you can just keep the disc in your PC's CD/DVD-ROM drive and swap it out when you switch to another game. This is the preferred method, since you don't have to worry about creating extra folders.



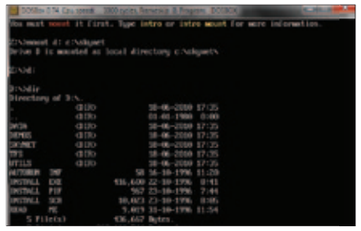
5 Internet game setup

But man, who has the shelf space for all their old gaming CDs? Or maybe you missed out on a PC classic like *Descent*. In these cases, you can always download DRM-free and legal versions of old games through services like GOG.com. After downloading a game, create a folder in your PC's **C:\DOS** directory and name it anything using six letters or less. Then, simply drag and drop all the downloaded files into that folder and move on to the next step.



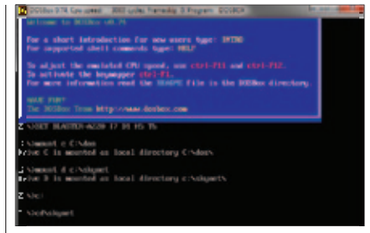
6 Begin installation

For all game installations, you'll need the **mount** command again. If you're running a game from a CD in your disc drive, type out the following command, where **X** is the actual letter name of your PC's disc drive (usually **D**): **mount d X:\ -t cdrom**. Alternately, if you're using a folder with a CD's copied contents or downloaded game files, just swap out the info after entering **mount d** for that exact folder's path and press Enter. Example: **mount d C:\DOS\skynet**.



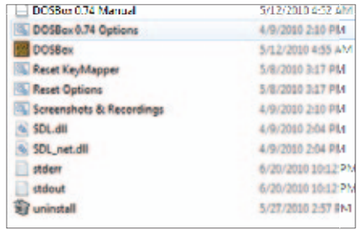
7 Finish installation

Type **D:** and push Enter. Depending on the game, the setup/install commands may fluctuate. An easy way to decipher the correct command: type **dir** after **D:\>** and press Enter. Scan the list for a file that says INSTALL or SETUP. Type out the file name (it's not case-sensitive) and press Enter. If everything's working correctly, you'll see an in-game configuration screen.



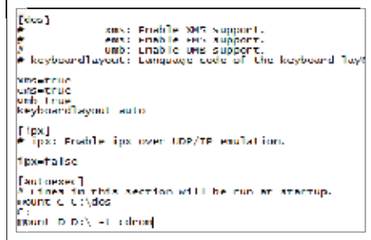
8 Running your games

After adjusting the in-game settings, go to the DOSBox home screen, type **C:** and press Enter. Type **cd/xxx**—where **xxx** is the location of the installation folder—and punch Enter. Example: **cd/skynet**. Then, type in the game's launch phrase, and press Enter. The game's launch phrase should be given to you after setup. If it's not, use the name of the .exe, which can be found in the installation folder.



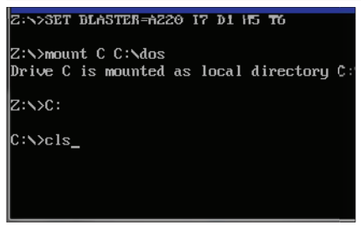
9 Preconfigure startup

You probably don't want to re-mount the virtual **C** and **D** drives on every subsequent visit to DOSBox, as that's kind of a pain. Luckily, there's a handy shortcut that'll bypass these steps. Find your DOSBox 0.74 install directory (should be located in the Program Files or Program Files (x86) folder), and open up DOSBox 0.74 Options.bat in notepad by double-clicking the file. Now, scroll to the very bottom of the window, and locate the entry: [autoexec].



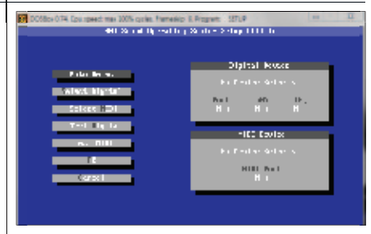
10 Comment the lines

You can ignore the descriptive info after the "#" character under [autoexec]. Add the following sentence right underneath the line that says "# Lines in this section will be run at startup": **mount c C:\dos** then hit Enter. On the next line type: **mount d X:\ -t cdrom** where X is your PC's CD/DVD ROM's drive letter. Press Enter again, type **C:** and save the notepad file and close. If you plan on switching between CDs and folders a lot, leave out the **mount d X:\ -t cdrom** line.



11 Helpful tips

Even with the startup log preconfigured, you can always re-mount a drive by deleting and/or editing the comments from within the options file. When you launch DOSBox, you can expand and retract full screen mode by pressing Alt and Enter when playing a game. If you've been busy filling DOSBox lines with text, type **cls** and press Enter to clear everything out. If a game is stuttering, press Ctrl and F12 to speed it up, or Ctrl and F11 to slow it down.



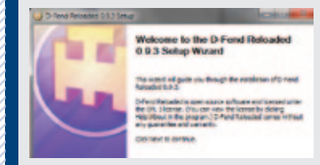
12 Front-end aid

So your games are all installed, but are they set up correctly? Are the video and sound options dialed to optimal settings? Do you have any idea what IRQ and DMA actually control anymore? Probably not. Using a respectable DOSBox front-end eliminates these quandaries. If you're looking for a more straightforward and less-stressful configuration experience, check out the D-Fend Reloaded sidebar to the right for how to install it.

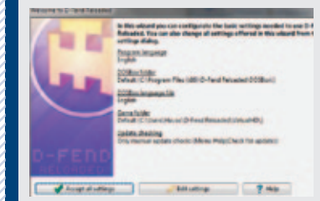
SKILLS

INSTALL D-FEND RELOADED

ADD BATCH PROFILES TO AVOID MISCONFIGURED IN-GAME SETTINGS

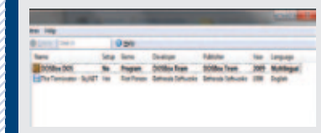


1 Download D-Fend Reloaded via the Vital Links section; run the install file. Choose "User-defined installation," click Next. Select "Use user profile folder for settings," and continue. Keep all boxes checked; press Next. Install to the default directory when prompted.



2 Launch D-Fend, and click Edit Settings. Leave the DOSBox folder location as-is, and click Next until you see the "Game folder" area. There should be a pre-populated field, but we need to change that. Delete the existing info, and type in **C:\dos** and click Next, then Finish.

3 With D-Fend open, select "Profile," and then "Add with wizard." Leave Emulation type and Wizard mode alone, and click Next. Click the folder icons to the right of "Program to be started" and "Setup program to enter in the .EXE and install file locations".



4 Click Next. D-Fend should add a pre-configured template. If it does, you're ready to go—just double-click the game name. Otherwise, you'll need to download a profile manually, and repeat step three. The Vital Links area has a URL for a bundle of popular preconfig packages.

The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

TESTED

Fermi: The Next Generation

GeForce GTX 470 1GB

EVGA

Now that the GeForce GTX 480 has had its moment in the sun, Nvidia's rolling out the rest of its 400 series of GPUs (also known by their architecture codename, Fermi), and it appears to be a long drop from the top. Priced to take on ATI's Radeon HD 5850, the GeForce GTX 470 looks like a pretty fair competitor on paper. It's loaded with *three billion* transistors, a core clocked at 600MHz and a gig of video memory, and debuts at a far-less-injurious price than the $500 GTX 480. EVGA's chassis has a slick, black heat chamber and, at 9.5 inches long, it ought to fit easily in most cases. But despite its slim 40nm die, the power draw is an uncomfortably high 225W at full bore, and it outputs enough heat to keep your apartment warm in Siberian winter. *Na zda-ró-vye!*

The synthetic benchmarks told the story I expected, scoring well above 20,000 in 3DMark06, for example. But the real proof lies in the gaming pudding, and that's where things start to go a bit sour. With particularly poor performances in *Crysis* and *World in Conflict*, the GTX 470 tests consistently near or under its chief competitor, the HD 5850—a card that costs $50 less. Factor in an idle power draw that's almost double the HD 5850's and you've got a card that'll keep leeching money (in the form of inflated utility bills) for as long as you own it. Unless you're *desperate* for PhysX or 3D Vision and can't afford the GTX 480, the GTX 470 simply isn't worth it. **EB**

PC GAMER 67

$320, www.evga.com
Category: Dream

GeForce GTX 460

EVGA

The buzz on the baby of the Fermi family is that it's the sub-$250 answer to high-performance gaming graphics. Indeed, the GTX 460 scored a sexy 18,540 in 3DMark06, but similar results from the disappointing GTX 470 made me wary. Luckily, where the GTX 470 falters, the GTX 460 really busts out. Particularly at 1680x1050, this little guy manages to squeeze some impressive numbers out of games.

Thirty-nine frames per second in *Crysis* is plenty fast enough to snipe North Koreans without the unpleasant eye strain that can ruin a gamer's day, for example. The biggest problem with the GTX 460 is how fast performance drops with higher resolutions. This isn't that big of a deal unless you were absolutely determined to use it to drive Nvidia's 3D Vision Surround or game at 2560x1600, where framerates drop below ATI's HD 5770. But if you've got a 22-inch display, the price is good and the performance ain't too shabby at all. **EB**

PC GAMER 83

$240, www.evga.com
Category: Mid

Benchmarks

	3DMark06	Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode 1	World in Conflict: Soviet Assault	Supreme Commander
EVGA GTX 460 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	18,540	P14,013	39/30/16	183/158/111	31/29/30	53/59/32
EVGA GTX 470 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	20,885	P16,083	40/32/18	214/199/103	48/41/23	54/52/50
ATI Radeon HD 5770 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	16,570	P10,027	34/27/17	189/162/114	35/31/21	53/50/35
ATI Radeon HD 5850 1680x1050/1920x1200/2560x1600	18,588	P14,234	50/42/28	244/204/128	52/45/32	54/54/49

Q&A

Pray for your display

Q: I've had a Gateway LP2407 24-inch display for a little over a year now, and a couple months ago I started noticing that it seemed to have an increasingly hard time starting up. It didn't matter if I was powering up my PC or just waking it from sleep mode—it took longer and longer to start up every time, and sometimes I had to reboot my PC several times in frustration before it lit up. Finally, it just stopped turning on altogether.

I remember a Hard Stuff column from a couple of years back where you mentioned a trick to reset a display that was going wonky by holding down the power button, but the Gateway LP2407 has a touch-sensitive power switch, so there's no way to hold it down. What should I do?

A: *Find out if your warranty is still in effect. The trick you are referring to can sometimes correct bizarre visual artifacts that show up on a display but don't appear to be related to your videocard or its driver; you unplug the display, hold down the power button for 30 seconds (to drain the capacitors), then plug it back in after five minutes or so.*

But I'm sorry to say that I don't think that's going to help you here. Disclosure: I am not an electrical engineer. Nonetheless, it does sound like a problem with failing capacitors, which no sleight-of-button is going to fix. On the other hand, it may not be an expensive problem to fix. If your display is no longer under warranty, I recommend asking how much it would cost to check out the problem (including shipping both ways). If shipping and triage exceed 50 percent of the cost of a new display, however, I'd say just bite the bullet and buy a new one. **LD**

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU Cooler Master Cosmos; 850W PSU	$300	**CASE AND PSU** Nzxt Alpha; Gamexstream 700W PSU	$187	**CASE AND PSU** Generic Case; Corsair 450W PSU	$161
PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-950 3.06GHz	$550	**PROCESSOR** Intel Core i7-920 2.66GHz	$256	**PROCESSOR** AMD Athlon X2 6000+ 3.0GHz	$57
MOTHERBOARD Asus P6T Deluxe V2	$262	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus P6T	$244	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus M3A76-CM	$68
MEMORY Corsair 6GB DDR3-1600	$154	**MEMORY** Corsair 6GB DDR3-1333	$178	**MEMORY** Corsair 2GB DDR2-800	$58
OPTICAL DRIVE LG BD370 Blu-ray	$174	**OPTICAL DRIVE** LG GH22NP20	$25	**OPTICAL DRIVE** Sony DDU1681S	$19
HARD DRIVE Intel X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$311	**HARD DRIVE** WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50	**HARD DRIVE** WD 250GB 7200RPM	$40
SOUNDCARD Creative Labs X-Fi Titanium	$130	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0
VIDEOCARD Radeon HD 5870 (2)	$780	**VIDEOCARD** Radeon HD 5870	$399	**VIDEOCARD** GeForce GT 220	$65
TOTAL PRICE	**$2,661**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$1,339**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$468**

TESTED

GX740 Gaming Laptop

MSI

An extra-fine, spacious, slate-colored wrist rest. Highlighted WASD keys and a numeric pad. Inverted-T arrow keys flush with the bottom edge of the keyboard. A handsome speaker grill. A touch-sensitive control strip that includes a programmable button ("*Quake Live*—stat!"). The GX740 calls itself a gaming laptop and backs it up

with the kind of detail you'd expect from one. It's also pretty lavish under the hood, with Intel's Core i7-720QM (1.6GHz), ATI's 1GB Mobility Radeon HD 5870 and 4GB of DDR3 RAM. So, with that, you'll want to take a screenshot of your 3DMark06 score of 12,551 (and P8,104 in Vantage) to show off to your fellow laptop gamers, and enjoy *Crysis* at 30fps at 1680x1050 with effects on High (righteous!), and *Supreme Commander* zipping along at 52fps at the same detail level.

But what's really distinctive about the rig is its heft, or lack thereof. It is without question a heavy-duty desktop replacement system (even with a nine-cell battery, it poops out at 91 minutes just watching a movie at full brightness and 75-percent volume), but it's surprisingly trim—less than 1.75 inches thick—and weighs only a hair over seven pounds. In other words, it's got a monster-truck engine in a sedan chassis—with a slightly dirty windshield. The screen could use at least a 15-percent boost in brightness, and the 1680x1050 native resolution is too meager, unless you plan to be tethered most of the time to a bright external display with lots of screen real estate. **LD**

PC GAMER 82

$1,400, www.msimobile.com
Category: Mid

TESTED

The Second Encounter

Alienware upgrades its gaming laptop fleet with cutting-edge tech *by Logan Decker*

Why beat around the bush or hand out ribbons to everybody so that no one's feelings get hurt? The 17-inch M17x and the 11.6-inch M11x from Alienware are still *the* best laptops that gamers can buy—even today, a year after the debut of the new and unparalleled design. In fact, they're even better now, with upgraded components, (much) faster performance and a couple of sly new tricks that make both models stand out from their predecessors.

M11x

The M11x gets the biggest boost from Nvidia's Optimus technology, which only fires up the GeForce GT 335M GPU when it's needed in order to preserve battery life—it even shuts down power to the bus lanes between the CPU and GPU when the Intel integrated graphics hardware is in use. This feature won't improve your framerates, of course, but you no longer have to manually switch from discrete to integrated graphics, or reboot after you do. Optimus technology essentially completes the M11x, which now serves you with more battery life when you need it and brawnier graphics when you need those, without any micromanaging on your part. The new M11x also upgrades the processor to Intel's ass-kicking Core i7 family (and like it's predecessor in the original, this proc comes overclock-ready, up to 2.27GHz). The result is a substantial price boost, but it's value is clearly established in the benchmark chart.

Optimus tech essentially completes the M11x, which now serves you with better battery life.

The only feature deleted in this revision is the VGA connector, but that won't be missed by anybody who'd pass up the recent harvest of ION 2-based netbooks in favor of the vastly more powerful, versatile and downright sexy M11x.

SYSTEM SPECS

OLD	NEW
CPU Intel U7300 (overclocked to 1.73GHz)	**CPU** Intel Core i7-640UM U7300 (1.2GHz)
Memory 4GB DDR3	**Memory** 4GB DDR3
Video Nvidia GeForce GT 335M 1GB	**Video** Nvidia GeForce GT 335M 1GB
Display 11.6-inch 1366x768 with LED backlighting	**Display** 11.6-inch 1366x768 with LED backlighting
Storage 500GB 7,200RPM hard drive	**Storage** 500GB 7,200RPM hard drive
Optical None	**Optical** None
Connectivity Onboard LAN, Bluetooth, 802.11 a/b/g/n	**Connectivity** Onboard LAN, Bluetooth, 802.11 a/b/g/n
OS Win 7 Home Premium 64-bit	**OS** Win 7 Home Premium 64-bit
Weight 4.5lbs	**Weight** 4.5lbs
Battery life 3.18 (hr:min), GPU active	**Battery life** 3:04 (hr:min), GPU active
Flair LED-backlit keyboard, laser-engraved nameplate	**Flair** LED-backlit keyboard, laser-engraved nameplate
VITALS	**VITALS**
LINK www.alienware.com	**LINK** www.alienware.com
MSRP $1,099 as configured	**MSRP** $1,299
CATEGORY Mid	**CATEGORY** Mid

M17x

As it did in the M11x, Alienware wisely upgraded the processor in the M17x to Intel's Core i7 family—in this case, the Core i7-920XM 2GHz (overclockable to a scorching 3.2GHz). Oddly, Alienware configured our test machine with 4GB of RAM instead of the 8GB lavished on the previous model. While the price of the new version is significantly lower than the original at its debut, and cutting the RAM doesn't seemed to have harmed the performance much, I'd still strongly recommend upgrading to 8GB. A high-end rig just doesn't feel quite as high-end if you struggle to task-switch or have to listen to the hard drive grinding its teeth. (I'd opt for this, in fact, over a solid-state drive, but that's a personal preference.)

The graphics are now being served by dual ATI Radeon Mobility HD 5870s, and looking at the benchmarks below, it's hard to argue with that. What's missing, however, is the ability to switch from the dual 5870s to integrated video in order to preserve battery life. Even on a desktop-replacement system that isn't meant to go jogging with you, that's a drag. But not enough to shake the M17x as the most powerful and lustworthy gaming portable in the galaxy.

A high-end rig just doesn't feel quite as high-end if you struggle to task-switch.

SYSTEM SPECS

OLD	NEW
CPU Intel Core 2 Extreme Quad QX9300 2.53GHz	**CPU** Intel Core i7-920XM 2GHz
Memory 8GB DDR3	**Memory** 4GB DDR3
Video Nvidia GeForce GTX 280M 1GB (x2)	**Video** ATI Radeon Mobility HD 5870 1GB (x2)
Display 17-inch 1920x1200 with LED backlighting	**Display** 17-inch 1920x1200 with LED backlighting
Storage 500GB 7,200RPM HD (x2) RAID 0	**Storage** 500GB HD 7,200RPM (x2) RAID 0
Optical Slot-load Blu-ray combo	**Optical** Slot-load Blu-ray combo
Connectivity Onboard LAN, Bluetooth, 802.11 a/b/g/draft-n	**Connectivity** Onboard LAN, Bluetooth, 802.11 a/b/g/n
OS Win7 Home Premium 64-bit	**OS** Win7 Home Premium 64-bit
Weight 11.7lbs	**Weight** 11.7lbs
Battery life 1:23 (hr:min)	**Battery life 1:11 (hr:min)**
Flair LED-backlit keyboard, laser-engraved nameplate	**Flair** LED-backlit keyboard, laser-engraved nameplate
VITALS	**VITALS**
LINK www.alienware.com	**LINK** www.alienware.com
MSRP $4,469	**MSRP** $3,784
CATEGORY Extreme Dream	**CATEGORY** Dream

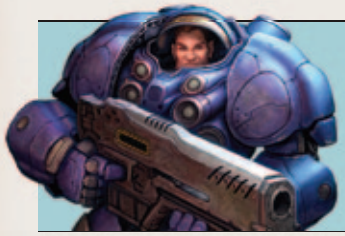
Benchmarks

	3DMark06	Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode 1	World in Conflict: Soviet Assault	Supreme Commander
Alienware M17x R2 1680x1050/1920x1200*/2560x1600**	19017	P16743	72/49/32 fps	207/281/165 fps	58/50/38 fps	51/55/54 fps
Alienware M17x 1680x1050/1920x1200*/2560x1600**	12545	P11886	40/32/18 fps	214/199/103 fps	48/41/23 fps	54/52/50 fps
Alienware M11x R2 1366x768*/1920x1200**/2560x1600**	10612	P6948	23/14/3 fps	156/100/59 fps	24/15/9 fps	43/34/23 fps
Alienware M11x 1366x768*/1920x1200**/2560x1600**	5197	P2857	12/4/>3fps	166/102/44 fps	20/>3/>3 fps	37/28/19 fps

*Native resolution **Requires external monitor that supports given resolution

TERRAN ARMY BLOCKS RAMP WITH SUPPLY DEPOT

"A bold tactic," says Zerg hivemind | Page A20



121st Marine Battalion Falls After General Noobsmoke_420 Deserts Forces | Page B3

Only comment from General Smoke: "AFK BRB"

WEATHER

TERRAN TIMES

November 34, 2489 | *"A tome of endless propaganda since 2287."* | 2500 Credits

Blue Gems to Boost War Effort

New "wonder mineral" can make anything except peace, say military

By Evan Lahti
Senior Space Correspondent

HELIOS, Koprulu Sector—In what may become the most important physical discovery of our time, leading Terran scientists have determined that a blue, crystalline substance, humbly named "minerals," possesses properties so versatile that it can be processed to fabricate anything needed by the modern military. This discovery will dramatically reshape the way the army's 1.8 million generals finance war.

Carving small fragments of the glowing minerals, which conveniently jut from the ground in hard-to-miss formations, workers ferry the material back to their command center. From this resource, armored attack fighters, powerful siege tanks, mechanized factories, advanced starports, missile turrets and even a well-trained, power-armored marine can be manufactured in seconds. The process of converting the mineral into these combat assets remains classified.

This finding will fundamentally change the way the military operates. "We're now a mining operation first, army second," said vigilante leader James Raynor. Unlike other armies throughout history, "the tip of the spear" will be "millions of expensive, incredibly vulnerable command centers that even the humblest of Zerg or Protoss band could reduce to rubble in about 10 seconds," each accompanied by six lightly-armed, alcoholic miners. "Our victory is assured," promised Raynor.

Drunken mineral slaves, later sacrificed for battle recon, drill for "blue gold."

Revealing another element of the ongoing Terran strategy, Raynor says that he's encouraged his leading commanders to "pick a random worker out of your miners and send him to his death, just to, y'know, see what the bad guys are building." SCVs, the frail construction suits, have received no recon or combat training, but Raynor is adamant that their regular sacrifice is part of a larger plan. "Sun Tzu said 'All warfare is based on deception.' But Sun Tzu didn't have glowing rocks and green gas. All warfare is now based on who can gather more of this blue #&@%, and then crank out as much complex military equipment and soulless men as our factories can produce."

This discovery will likely save the careers of troubled Terran scientists, who had recently fallen under heavy criticism regarding their forgetfulness of researched technology. "Once something like armor plating or deployable tanks is invented, you shouldn't have to research it again for the next battle—I'm pretty sure that's the way it's supposed to work," said one frustrated Terran commander.

The breakthrough arrives weeks after war historians uncovered documents that indicate that ancient armies called GDI and The Brotherhood of Nod manufactured their forces from a single resource: a mysterious green crystal called Tiberium. "History tells us that armies have always relied on the stuff nearby to fight the enemy," says Raynor, smoking a cigar made out of minerals. "If that means harvesting fish and wood to make an aircraft carrier, so be it. If we drill enough random junk around our base, we should be fine," says Raynor. "We require more minerals. A lot more."